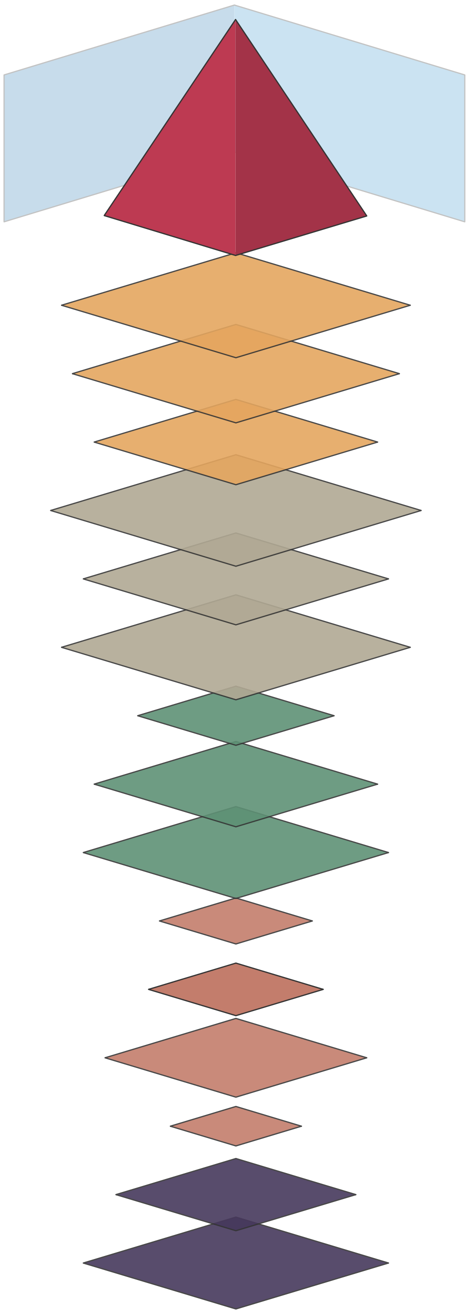
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

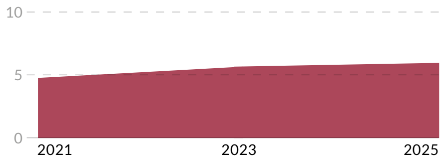
GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

ETHIOPIA



6.03 ↗0.35
CRIMINALITY SCORE

50th of 193 countries ↗16
14th of 54 African countries ↗5
6th of 9 East African countries ↗1



CRIMINAL MARKETS	6.17	↗0.10
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	8.00	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	7.50	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	6.50	↗0.50
ARMS TRAFFICKING	8.50	0.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	7.00	↘1.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	8.00	0.00
FLORA CRIMES	4.50	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	6.50	↗0.50
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	7.00	↗1.00
HEROIN TRADE	3.50	0.00
COCAINE TRADE	4.00	0.00
CANNABIS TRADE	6.00	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	3.00	0.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	5.50	↗0.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	7.00	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS	5.90	↗0.60
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	4.00	↗2.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	7.00	↗0.50
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	6.00	↗1.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	6.00	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	6.50	↘0.50

This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

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Funded by the European Union

ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

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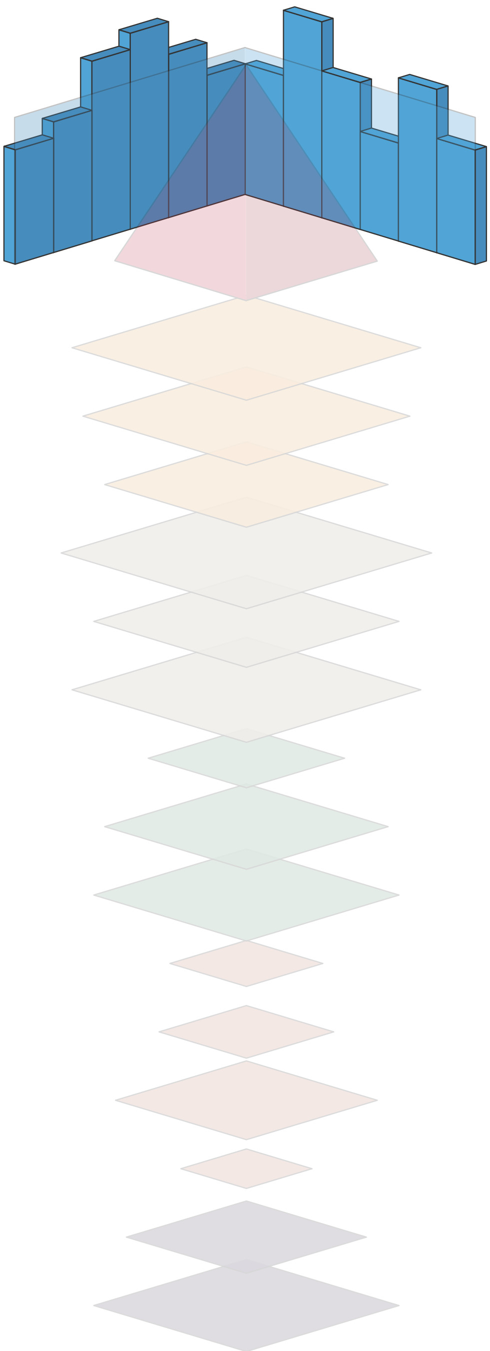
GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

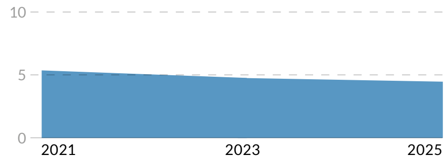
ETHIOPIA



4.50 ↘0.25

RESILIENCE SCORE

111th of 193 countries ↘9
17th of 54 African countries ↘3
2nd of 9 East African countries -



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	3.50	↘0.50
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	4.00	↘0.50
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	5.50	↘0.50
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	6.00	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	5.00	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	4.00	↗0.50
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	4.00	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	6.00	↘1.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	4.50	↘0.50
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	3.00	0.00
PREVENTION	5.00	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	3.50	↘0.50

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Ethiopia's human trafficking market has evolved in recent years, exacerbated by conflicts in Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia, which have led to increased displacement. Although the most intense phase of the crisis has passed, many Ethiopians – particularly young women – continue to migrate under precarious conditions, often falling victim to trafficking. The reopening of regional borders intensified movement of youths to Western Asia, where exploitation is common, especially in transit countries such as Yemen. Ethiopia remains a source and transit hub, with trafficking routes expanding to Western Asia and Europe. The market involves networked groups, foreign operatives and corrupt officials facilitating illicit flows. Despite authorities' attempts to regulate this criminal market, local economic demands sustain trafficking, especially in agriculture, construction and domestic work.

Ethiopia's human smuggling market is similarly significant, with signs that it is increasing amid ongoing regional conflicts and economic challenges. The market is dominated by criminal networks and foreign groups that exploit instability to facilitate cross-border movement. Smuggling routes primarily extend eastward to Yemen via Djibouti and Somalia, westward to Sudan, and southward to Kenya for transit to southern Africa. Saudi Arabia remains the primary destination, with wealthier migrants accessing distant locations with the help of costly smugglers. Those with fewer resources often face displacement or resort to dangerous routes, particularly from Tigray to Sudan and from Oromia to Saudi Arabia via Yemen.

Ethiopia's extortion and kidnapping market has expanded in recent years, involving mafia-style groups and armed factions such as those in Oromia, Amhara and Tigray. Although these groups deny involvement in extortive activities, public perception and media reports link them to ransom demands. Such activities are increasing in urban areas, although some rebel factions tend to avoid extortion in order to achieve community support. This market intersects with arms smuggling and financial crimes, with proceeds likely funding insurgencies. Kidnappings of individuals, including children, occur both domestically and across borders.

TRADE

Arms trafficking in Ethiopia has expanded owing to ongoing conflicts in Amhara, Oromia and Tigray, increasing the availability of battlefield-grade weapons. Ethiopia primarily functions as a destination and, to a lesser extent, a transit and source country for firearms in the Horn of Africa. The market is sustained by criminal networks, state-linked actors and foreign entities who take advantage of poorly manned borders and corruption. Arms trafficking intersects with financial crimes and other illicit markets, further entrenching instability.

The counterfeit goods market in Ethiopia appears structurally stable and closely linked to illicit trade in excisable goods. It primarily involves trade in substandard medicines, cosmetics, clothing, food and electronics, facilitated by organized networks spanning multiple countries. Economic challenges, including foreign currency shortages, have fuelled demand, although logistical and security issues have raised operational costs and consumer prices. The market relies on collusion among criminal networks, state-embedded actors and private-sector figures. Despite enforcement efforts, counterfeit trade persists owing to affordability for lower-income consumers. Profits circulate through illicit financial channels, with corruption key to facilitating imports and distribution, which undermines intellectual property rights and legitimate businesses.

The illicit trade in excisable goods in Ethiopia has increased significantly in recent years, with major contraband items including medicines, agricultural products, electronics and second-hand clothes. The trade, facilitated by criminal networks and state-embedded actors, often thrives in regions with weak governance and mismanaged borders, especially along the eastern and southern routes. Despite government crackdowns, trade persists owing to high demand for untaxed and cheaper goods. The market contributes to financial crimes and arms trafficking and undermines legitimate markets, with profits often laundered through cash-based transactions and export–import trade. Corruption plays a key role in enabling these operations.

ENVIRONMENT

Ethiopia's flora crimes market is moderate, and has a limited value. The market involves the illegal trade of plants used for food and beverages, medicine and fumigation. Ongoing conflicts, particularly in Tigray, have weakened law enforcement, contributing to increased deforestation and poaching. The illegal wildlife trade in Ethiopia appears to be increasing, particularly with regard to activities such as poaching and trafficking of elephants and cheetahs. Reports indicate increased numbers of poaching incidents over the reporting period. The trade is linked to arms smuggling, which facilitates illegal hunting and threatens local ecosystems. Social acceptance of hunting, especially in rural areas, complicates enforcement efforts. Owing to weak law enforcement and high connectivity, Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa serves as a trafficking hub. The environmental impacts of wildlife crimes include habitat destruction and biodiversity disruption, exacerbating the vulnerability of wildlife and the ramifications of this criminal market.

Illicit gold mining and trade in Ethiopia have intensified since 2020, driven by both local and foreign actors in regions such as Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela and Tigray. The conflict in Tigray has hindered government control, allowing armed groups to engage in illicit mining, with gold smuggled to Sudan and the UAE. This undermines legal frameworks and affects Ethiopia's economy, as gold is a major export commodity. Despite government crackdowns, the scale of illegal mining exceeds enforcement capabilities, with transnational networks further complicating efforts. The environmental and societal impacts include severe pollution, health risks and funding for armed groups, exacerbating local conflicts.

DRUGS

Ethiopia serves as a transit country in the transnational heroin trade, with heroin imported mainly by plane and passing through the country en route to West Africa, Europe and the Americas. Although domestic consumption is moderate, there has been growing supply within the country. Trends show an increasing role for Ethiopia as a transit point for heroin originating in Southeast and Southwest Asia. The impact of these dynamics on domestic drug use and international trafficking is a significant concern.

Ethiopia also serves as a transit hub for the cocaine trade, particularly for cocaine originating from Latin America. Criminal networks, notably from Brazil and Nigeria, use Bole International Airport to smuggle cocaine to Western and Central Europe, leveraging Ethiopia's geographic location and transportation infrastructure. The Ethiopian Customs Commission has reported increased smuggling activities, despite some seizures aimed at disrupting the market.

Ethiopia has a notable cannabis production market, particularly in rural areas such as Shashemene. A notable local consumption base exists and smuggling to neighbouring countries appears to be increasing, especially facilitated by improvements to the Ethiopia–Kenya highway. Several large-scale seizures of smuggled cannabis have been noted in recent years. Despite the rise in cross-border trafficking, there is no indication of violence linked to the cannabis trade in the country.

Synthetic drugs or precursor chemicals are not produced at significant volumes in Ethiopia. There have been no notable changes in the market's structure or its impact on the country's criminal economy. Even with the increasing diversion of licit drugs and essential chemicals into the illicit market – with Mandrax emerging as a regional issue – there is no evidence of a significant shift in Ethiopia's limited role in this illicit trade.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crimes have been steadily rising in the country, with financial institutions remaining prime targets. Various types of attack, including website defacement, malware, distributed denial-of-service attacks and network hacking, have been reported. These crimes undermine trust in financial institutions and digital technologies, with attacks becoming more frequent and sophisticated, reflecting growing technical expertise among perpetrators. The country's evolving digital landscape has made it more vulnerable to these attacks, becoming a target much more than being a key origin point for these types of crime. Although the state's response claims high success rates in thwarting attacks and preventing significant damages, incidents such as a major banking glitch enabling illegal withdrawals highlight ongoing weaknesses in the country's cybersecurity resilience.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes, including mobile banking fraud, procurement fraud, embezzlement and tax evasion, are prevalent in Ethiopia. Illicit financial activities involve domestic and transnational criminal networks that exploit legal businesses to conceal their operations. Parallel market exchanges and illicit financial flows, driven by high demand for foreign currency, contribute to economic instability and weaken financial regulations. Despite efforts by law enforcement, these crimes persist, with corruption exacerbating the issue. Illicit proceeds are often laundered through financial institutions, hawala networks and mobile banking systems, impacting both the local economy and foreign exchange reserves.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Mafia-style groups, notably the Oromo Liberation Army and Amhara militants, increasingly engage in criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom, extortion and arms trafficking to fund their operations amid ongoing regional conflicts. These groups exploit territorial control, particularly in the Oromia and Amhara regions, using local communities for support while enforcing illegal taxes and setting up checkpoints. Although politically motivated, their activities are criminal in nature and the proceeds from these organized crimes fund some of their operations. The leadership structures within these factions are generally well defined, but splinter groups complicate their cohesion. Despite some cooperation with local communities, these groups' criminal actions exacerbate violence and instability, with limited governmental acknowledgment or corrective action. The interplay between local insurgents and state actors further fuels the conflict.

Even so, organized crime in Ethiopia is mainly driven by looser criminal networks involved in arms smuggling, human trafficking, financial crimes, illicit trade of counterfeit goods and illegal mining (gold in particular). These networks operate both domestically and transnationally, with smuggling routes extending to countries such as Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Sudan. They exploit systemic vulnerabilities such as regulatory gaps to facilitate illicit financial flows and trade, with connections to Western Asia, China and Europe. Despite government crackdowns and specialized efforts, the adaptability and resilience of these networks sustain their influence, exacerbating local conflicts and violence, as seen in recent kidnappings. Their continued presence highlights significant challenges to state authority and security.

State-embedded actors in Ethiopia play a key role in organized crime, leveraging their positions within the government to protect or directly engage in illicit activities. These actors, embedded in regional administrations, the military, intelligence and judicial bodies, facilitate crimes such as the illicit trade of goods, financial crimes and illegal mining. Embezzlement and procurement fraud are prevalent within public institutions, and state actors are complicit in large-scale misappropriation. Weakening state resilience and territorial control have expanded opportunities for these actors, with some involved in transnational crimes. The growth of infrastructure projects has further facilitated these activities.

Foreign actors also play significant parts in various criminal markets in Ethiopia. The diaspora and Somali and Eritrean communities are involved in financial crimes such as illicit currency exchanges and hawala transactions, mainly in urban and border areas with weak regulation. Chinese nationals are linked to illegal mining, especially the gold trade in resource-rich regions such as Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambela. West African actors, particularly Nigerians, have turned Ethiopia from a transit point into a destination for drug trafficking. Collaboration between local and foreign actors is evident in sectors such as human trafficking, illicit mining and financial crimes, with cross-border activities involving not only neighbouring countries but also further afield.

Similarly, in recent years, private-sector actors have continued to facilitate organized crime, with key sectors such as export–import businesses, small-scale enterprises, licensed recruitment agencies and mining operations involved in illicit activities. These sectors are used for trade-based money laundering, parallel market currency exchanges and human trafficking. Recruitment agencies exploit workers for trafficking and mining operations illegally exploit resources and operate transnationally. Despite some decline in independent private-sector activity, government control is growing, particularly through state-embedded actors, undermining the private sector's autonomy and increasing criminal entanglements.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Since 2018, Ethiopia's government has faced significant challenges in addressing organized crime owing to political instability and ongoing conflicts. Efforts to combat crimes such as human trafficking, arms smuggling and illicit financial flows, initially supported by international partners, have been hindered by war, ethnic tensions and a weakening central authority. Despite new laws and amendments, anti-corruption actions have been limited, with state actors often implicated in criminal activities. The government's preoccupation with security issues, such as the Tigray war and insurgencies in Oromia and Amhara, has further distracted from anti-crime initiatives, exacerbating state fragility. Ongoing governance challenges, corruption and human rights violations undermine effective rule of law and public confidence. Corruption is a persistent challenge in Ethiopia, despite government measures such as establishing the Ethiopian Federal Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission. The commission's effectiveness is limited owing to its lack of investigative and prosecutorial powers. Efforts such as the introduction of electronic government procurement and a national digital payments strategy aim to reduce corruption by increasing transaction transparency. However, implementation has been erratic and political factors, including perceptions of politically motivated actions, have undermined anti-corruption efforts. Ongoing internal conflicts exacerbate the issue, with corruption continuing to thrive amid weak oversight.

Ethiopia actively engages in international and regional efforts to combat organized crime, having ratified key treaties against it, although notably the country is not a part to the Arms Trade Treaty. The country has also participated in organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, Eastern and Southern Africa Anti-Money Laundering Group and the Khartoum Process. However, gaps exist in international cooperation, particularly in mutual legal assistance and joint investigative efforts. Bilateral treaties with countries such as Djibouti and Türkiye have strengthened cooperation in criminal matters. Despite these efforts, ongoing internal conflicts, including tensions with neighbouring states, have strained Ethiopia's international relations and reputation, affecting its ability to combat organized crime effectively.

Internally, Ethiopia has developed a comprehensive legal framework to combat organized crime, with laws addressing wildlife conservation, environmental protection, human trafficking and financial crimes. Efforts to combat small-arms proliferation are supported by disarmament, demobilization and reintegration initiatives. The government has also advanced in cybersecurity with the draft National Cyber Security Policy. However, the effectiveness of these laws is undermined by ongoing internal conflicts, political instability and challenges in enforcement, limiting their impact on organized crime.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Ethiopia's judiciary, while officially independent, has historically aligned with government policies. The appointment of a new chief justice in 2023 initially indicated renewed efforts in judicial reform, leading to the creation of specialized benches for handling organized crime cases. However, recent reports indicate limited progress in this area, with no significant updates on case outcomes or continued reform. The judiciary continues to manage organized crime cases, supported by dedicated benches and expert prosecutors, although transparency and effectiveness remain concerns. Ethiopia's detention centres, both official and unofficial, are overcrowded and harsh, with reports of unlawful detentions, particularly of political prisoners, amid ongoing internal conflicts.

With regard to law enforcement, Ethiopia has implemented various reforms to combat organized crime, establishing specialized police and justice units targeting wildlife trafficking, financial crimes and human trafficking. Legal frameworks have been strengthened, and collaboration between agencies like the Ethiopian Customs Commission and National Intelligence has led to successful interceptions, including the dismantlement of a major smuggling network by arresting dozens of travel agency owners involved in moving thousands of Ethiopians through coordinated raids, showcasing an intelligence-led strategy aimed at stopping smugglers before victims begin their journeys. International support has further boosted capabilities. Despite these advancements, challenges such as corruption, impunity, ethnic tensions and gaps in law enforcement persist, undermining public trust and hindering the effectiveness of policing efforts.

Ethiopia's territorial integrity faces challenges from regional conflicts, vast land borders with numerous vulnerable entry points and internal governance weaknesses. Smuggling of arms, humans and illicit goods is prevalent along borders with Kenya, South Sudan, Sudan and Somalia. Efforts to enhance border security include a counter-narcotics unit at Bole International Airport and strengthened control policies, although corruption undermines their effectiveness. The Tigray conflict, Eritrean military involvement and ongoing violence in Amhara and Oromia further destabilize the country. Although peace agreements and national dialogues are ongoing, implementation remains slow, limiting their impact. In addition, Ethiopia faces cyber threats targeting key infrastructure.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Ethiopia has strengthened its anti-money laundering (AML) framework through legislative measures and institutional reforms, yet enforcement challenges remain. The country was removed from international monitoring lists after addressing compliance gaps but continues to refine its regulatory approach. The national financial intelligence body, now under the prime minister's office, has improved coordination with domestic and international partners. Recent directives extend AML measures to non-financial sectors, while a proposed bill on unexplained wealth faces criticism. Corruption scandals have also affected key officials. In addition, the unregulated expansion of online gambling presents new risks, prompting enforcement actions against betting establishments. Regulatory gaps persist in effectively combating financial crimes.

Ethiopia's economy is considered repressed, hindered by weak rule of law, outdated regulations, and an underdeveloped labour market. These structural issues, compounded by economic instability, inflation, and ongoing conflicts, continue to undermine growth prospects. The cash-heavy nature of the economy is a significant barrier to creating a regulatory environment that supports legitimate business and deters criminal activity. In response, the government has launched initiatives to regulate and digitize the economy, aiming to reduce organized crime's influence. Measures such as restricting cash withdrawals, capping cash holdings, and demonetizing banknotes have been introduced to address risks associated with the cash economy. However, regulatory capacity remains inconsistent, and efforts to control cash flow and curb illicit financial activities have yielded mixed results.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Ethiopia has taken steps to strengthen victim and witness protection, particularly in cases of human trafficking. Legislation has established provisions for rescue, support and rehabilitation, complemented by updates to referral mechanisms and increased screening of vulnerable populations, including returning migrant workers. Furthermore, to improve victim identification, law enforcement officials received training with support from International Organization for Migration and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. These efforts were complemented by specialized border units trained to distinguish between smugglers and asylum seekers, as well as the establishment of refugee-return hotlines in key transit areas. Migration response centres provide shelter, legal aid and family reunification services. Despite improvements, victim assistance is inconsistent, with limited services for male victims and broader organized crime cases. Witness protection measures exist, but non-state actors remain the primary service providers for victims of conflict-related sexual violence, highlighting gaps in government support. Protests in Tigray reflect ongoing demands for justice.

Ethiopia has also expanded its efforts to prevent organized crime through legislative, strategic and public awareness initiatives. A national crime prevention strategy was adopted, focusing on financial crimes, cybercrime and human trafficking. Legislative measures have strengthened anti-trafficking efforts, while incentive programmes encourage reporting of illegal financial activities. Public awareness campaigns led by government agencies target cybercrime, illicit trade and human trafficking. Increased oversight of recruitment agencies aims to curb illegal migration. Community outreach programmes continue to raise awareness of trafficking risks. Furthermore, several preventive and enforcement measures were taken to combat illicit trade and protect public health in Ethiopia during the reporting period. Safety alerts identifying falsified and substandard medicines and ordering their removal and disposal were issued as part of ongoing surveillance to disrupt counterfeit medicine trafficking.

Ethiopia's legal framework for civil society has evolved, with reforms allowing greater freedom for NGOs. However, operational challenges persist owing to past legal restrictions and ongoing conflicts. Government oversight of civil society remains stringent, affecting organizations addressing organized crime. Media freedom has declined, with journalists detained and outlets censored under laws targeting disinformation. Internal conflicts have exacerbated these restrictions, with government also temporarily suspending and then later reinstating international aid organizations.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.