

# The under-age workers

Child News 12.10.02

Bonding is common practice among the lower castes, and although the decision to part with their children is not made lightly, parents do not agonize over it. Neither, evidently, do the children, who regard bonding as a rite of passage, the event that transforms them into adults.

By Azmat Rasul

Child labour has assumed epidemic proportions in Pakistan. Statistics are unreliable, but the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) last year estimated the number of Pakistani working children to be 'realistically in the region of 11-12 million.'

At least half these children are under the age of ten. Despite a recent series of laws prohibiting child labour and indentured servitude, children make up a quarter of the unskilled work force, and



inexhaustible — owing in part to a birth rate that is among the world's highest and to an education system that can accommodate only about a third of the country's school-age children.

Each year millions of children enter the labor force, where they compete with adults — often even with their parents — for what little work is available. In many regions the

that are usually described as advanced. The worldwide population of children under fourteen who work full-time, is thought to exceed 200 million. But few countries have done less to abolish or to contain the practice than Pakistan. And fewer still have a ruling class that opposes workplace reform and human-rights initiatives as vigorously.

Given its relative prosperity,

consistently refused to enforce those very laws it enacted to protect its most vulnerable citizens. We have far more in the way of resources and legal remedies than China, India, and Indonesia, and we do far less for our young than they. The problem is lack of political will. The problem is greed."

The median age of children now entering the Pakistani work force is seven. Two years ago it

taller than the piles of laundry they wash for their wealthier neighbors. Even the world-class industries of Islamabad, the modern capital, are staffed in large part by children and adolescents; politicians

for food. As soon as they are old enough to have an elementary understanding of their circumstances, their parents teach them that they are expected to pay their way, to make sacrifices, and, if necessary, to travel far from home and live with strangers. "When my children were three, I told them they must be prepared to work for the good of the family," says Amna, a Sheikhpura villager who bonded her five children to masters in distant villages. "I told them again and again that they would be bonded at five. And when the time came for them to go, they were prepared and went without complaint."

Bonding is common practice among the lower castes, and although the decision to part with their children is not made lightly, parents do not agonize over it. Neither, evidently, do the children, who regard bonding as a rite of passage, the event that transforms them into adults. Many look forward to it in the same way that American children look forward to a first communion or getting a driver's license. They are eager to cast off childhood, even if to do so means taking on adult burdens. Irfana, a twelve-year-old schoolgirl who spent four years as a brick worker before she was freed by an anti-slavery organization, remembers feeling relieved when her father handed her over at age six to a kiln owner. "My friends and I knew that sooner or later we would be sent off to the factories or the fields. We were tired of doing chores and minding infants. We looked forward to the day when we would be given responsibilities and the chance to earn money. At the time work seemed glamorous and children who worked seemed quite important."

She soon learned otherwise. "For the masters, bonded

prohibiting child labour and indentured servitude, children make up a quarter of the unskilled work force, and can be found in virtually every factory, every workshop, every field. They earn on average a third of the adult wage.

Certain industries, notably carpet making and brick making, cannot survive without them. One World Bank economist maintains that Pakistan's economic viability correlates with the number of children in its factories. The child labour pool is all but

— often even with their parents — for what little work is available. In many regions the surplus of cheap child labour has depressed the already inadequate adult wage to the point where a parent and child together now earn less than the parent alone earned a year ago. As long as children are put to work, poverty will spread and standards of living will continue to decline.

To be sure, child labour is an institution throughout the Third World, and its incidence has been increasing in countries

and human-rights initiatives as vigorously.

Given its relative prosperity, its constitutional prohibition against child labor, and its leaders' signatures on every UN human and child rights convention, Pakistan's de facto dependency on child labour is troubling and to its critics inexcusable.

"Inaction speaks louder than words," says I. A. Rehman, the director of the HRCP. "This government is in continuous violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and has

The median age of children now entering the Pakistani work force is seven. Two years ago it was eight. Two years from now it may be six. In the lowest castes, children become labourers almost as soon as they can walk. Much of the nation's farmland is worked by toddlers, yoked teams of three-, four-, and five-year-olds who plough, seed, and glean fields from dawn to dusk.

On any given morning the canal banks and irrigation ditches in rural villages are lined with urchins who stand no

progress and to give them instructions or a few encouraging blows, but for the better part of the workday they are left to themselves. "Children are cheaper to run than tractors and smarter than oxen," explains one landowner in Multan. He prefers field hands between seven and ten years old, "because they have the most energy, although they lack discipline."

In rural areas children are raised without health care, sanitation, or education; many are as starved for affection as

She soon learned otherwise. "For the masters, bonded children are a commodity. My master bought, sold, and traded us like livestock, and sometimes he shipped us great distances. The boys were beaten frequently to make them work long hours. The girls were often violated. My best friend got ill after she was raped, and when she could not work, the master sold her to a friend of his in a village a thousand kilometers away. Her family was never told where she was sent, and they never saw her again."