

Human Rights
Dawar 8.2.03

US report draws attention

By Anwar Iqbal

WASHINGTON: Plucked from their homes when some are still babies, the camel jockeys of the Persian Gulf are tied on camels' backs and often beaten because their cries make the animals run faster.

A recent US State Department report identifies Pakistan — also India and Bangladesh — as the source countries for camel jockeys and the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar as the destination.

Anti-Slavery International, an advocacy group working to end this practice, says that often children are also smuggled from the Sudan for this purpose.

Human rights groups estimate that at least 30 boys are kidnapped in Pakistan every month to work in the camel racing business in the Gulf.

A study carried out by the Bangladesh National Women's Lawyers Association estimates that as many as 7,000 people, mostly children, are trafficked out of Bangladesh each year.

Another report by the Center for Women and Children Studies in Dhaka, found that during the 1990s 1,683 boys were sent out of Bangladesh from Dhaka. Most were younger than 10 years old and were likely to be used as camel jockeys in

Gulf countries.

As recent news reports show, the problem is much more widespread than earlier estimated:

- * Five children, all under 7-years-old, have been rescued after an attempt was made to smuggle them to the United Arab Emirates to be used as camel jockeys.

- * Authorities have rescued two boys who were smuggled to the UAE to work as camel jockeys.

- * Police have detained a couple that kidnapped children from remote villages. They believe the couple works for an organization supplying camel jockeys to the Emirates.

- * A Bangladeshi boy Najmul sustained irreversible damage to both kidneys, probably from being deprived of water in order to make him lose weight. He died at a hospital in Dhaka, age 7.

- * A Pakistani non-governmental organization, Ansar Burney Trust, rescued 49 children from camel stables in the UAE.

- * Four young Bangladeshi boys were beaten and underfed while working as camel jockeys in UAE. A 9-year-old boy lost an eye while working as a camel jockey.

- * A documentary by Karachi-based NGO Lawyers for Human Rights and

Legal Aid, filmed in March 2002, shows children recently returned from Dubai describing how they were beaten and given electric shocks if they did not perform well in races.

Such stories are so common that they no longer make it to the front page. The UAE newspapers are worse. They barely acknowledge this problem. Even in Pakistan and Bangladesh, they usually get single-column treatment on some inside page and are often ignored by the readers.

Every now and then a reprimand from a Western government, a major international report, or a big catch involving a dozen or more children generate some heat, forcing newspapers to open up space on their front pages and police to carry out some raids. But all is soon forgotten. And the smugglers, as well as those who use these children as jockeys, quietly resume their business.

The State Department's annual report on human trafficking in 2003 promises to convince governments to take some action against this problem.

To deal with this problem, the State Department urged the source countries to increase training facilities for low-level police officers, prosecutors

and judges throughout the country.

For the first time this year, the US administration is also introducing measures that would allow punitive actions against governments that fail to stop human trafficking. This includes sanctions on non-humanitarian and non-trade-related aid from Washington.

The State Department report, however, mentions that the UAE and other Gulf states have taken measures to curb this practice.

Human rights groups, however, say that the sanctions suggested by the State Department will have limited impact on the traffickers or those who import the children for the races.

Groups like Anti-Slavery International urge the Bush administration to use its influence to stop this practice, reminding Washington that it has close ties with all these governments and has enough clout to force a crackdown on camel-jockeying.

The five children, mentioned in one of the above reports, were between 12 months old and 7 years old. Other victims are older, but most are kidnapped before they reach the age of 10.

In the Gulf, they are trained as jockeys and forced to ride camels during races. Such races are very popular in

to camel-jockeys

the oil-rich Arab states. Betting on camels is common and observers say that hundreds of thousands of dollars change hands at every race.

The camel owners, often-rich Arab sheikhs, prefer lean and emaciated children because they weigh less. Grown-up men are not used as jockeys because their weight slows down a camel, observers say.

Volunteers and law enforcement officers who have visited training facilities for these jockeys say that the children are often starved and are refused drinks to ensure that they do not put on weight.

Most jockeys are retired by the time they are 12 because that's when they begin to weight too heavily. Since they have no education and no other training, they are forced back to the countries of their origin where they end up in government-sponsored "shelters," as the State Department report says — or simply become street kids.

Since they are separated from their families while still very young, most have no memories of their homes and cannot be reunited. Instead, they are forced to live as beggars or indulge in petty crimes.

Anti-Slavery International says that "camel jockeys are often kidnapped,

sold by their parents or relatives, or taken on false pretences from their own country."

During a visit to Pakistan's southern desert, where most of these camel jockeys are taken from, this correspondent discovered that parents are often duped by kidnappers who visit remote villages pretending to be representatives of multinational companies. They offer to recruit their children for these companies, claiming that the recruiting company will bring up, educate and train their children for profitable careers.

They tell the parents that sending their children for work in the Gulf is just like "sending your son to a school in the city," one affected parent told me the kidnapper said. "Your son will visit you every month. He will have a promising career, and you will get some money every month too."

"I said to myself what could be better than this for my child. So I decided to send him away. I did not know that I would never see him again," said the father who gave only his first name Feika.

"The use of children as jockeys in camel racing is itself extremely dangerous and can result in serious injury and even death. There is also evidence of mistreatment and torture

of camel jockeys by traffickers and employers. However, the children's separation from their families and their transportation to a country where the people, culture and usually the language are completely unknown means that the children are not in a position to report incidents of abuse," says the Anti-Slavery International.

The trafficking of children for use as camel jockeys is prohibited by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and by the International Labour Organization's Conventions No. 29 on forced labour and No. 138 on minimum age — all of which have been ratified by the UAE.

But volunteers for advocacy groups, who have visited the race facilities, say that children under 14 are still being used as camel jockeys and that the UAE government has not taken adequate measures to tackle the problem.

Both the State Department and Anti-Slavery International acknowledge that Pakistan has taken positive measures to prevent trafficking of children out of the country by improving the documentation procedures and security at border crossings. But they say that more needs to be done.