

Asia, Africa Lead in Putting Children to Work: ILO

By Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS—One child in every six has been put to work world-wide, despite international efforts to tackle the problem, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

The Asia-Pacific region is home to the world's largest number of child workers, accounting for 127 million of an estimated 246 million world-wide, ILO said in a 58-page report entitled "A World Without Child Labour."

Africa has the highest proportion of child labourers, with some 29 percent of African children younger than 15 put to work, compared with 19 percent in Asia.

Child labour also persists in wealthy countries, with a prevalence rate of three percent among 10- to 14-year-olds. The rate is just over four percent in the transition economies of Eastern Europe.

In terms of numbers, sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 48 million child workers, and Latin America and the Caribbean, another 17.4 million.

"Despite the increasing commitment by governments and their partners to tackle child labour world-wide, it remains a problem on a massive scale," ILO Director-General Juan Somavia said. However, he added, "we are moving from denial to awareness" of the problem.

The International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), an alliance of more than 90 donor and recipient countries, has singled out eight Asian countries where child labour and child trafficking are rampant: Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam.

In Thailand alone, the trafficking of children represents an annual trade equivalent to 50 to 60 percent of the government's annual budget. As a business, child trafficking is more profitable than drug trafficking.

Worst Forms

The worst forms of child labour include employment in mining, quarrying, manufacturing, fireworks production and domestic work. According to the report, child labour also often assumes serious proportions in commercial agriculture associated with global markets for cocoa,

coffee, cotton, rubber, sisal, tea and other commodities.

In Brazil, Kenya and Mexico, children under 15 make up between 25 percent and 30 percent of the total workforce in the production of various commodities. Somavia described the ideal situation as "parents at work, children at school."

"If parents do not have a job, then inevitably, there is enormous pressure on children to work," he said.

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