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**SOUTH ASIAN CONSULTATION ON
CHILD LABOUR IN CARPET INDUSTRY**

**Welcome address - by
KAILASH SATYARATHI, Convenor,
Committee for Eradication of Child Labour**

I feel privileged to welcome you on behalf of the Committee for the Eradication of Child Labour and Asian Cultural Forum on Development, the Committee for Eradication of Child Labour was formed by 12 prominent social organisations, struggling to combat Child Labour System in Carpet Industry in India. The Asian Cultural Forum on Development is among the largest NGO network in 25 countries of Asia - pacific region.

I must pay my sincere gratitudes to the Hon'ble Justice P.N. Bhagwati, who is among the top illuminaries in the contemporary Judicial World. He will be inaugurating this seminar. The bonded and child labourer of this country will never forget the historic contribution made by Justic Bhagwati, not only for hearing their plight in the highest temple of justice but also for his efforts to take justice at the doors of the non-being, exiles of civilisation.

I welcome Mrs. Lesley Roberts, Director of Anti Slavery International, London, which is the world's oldest Human Rights organisation. Mrs. Resley and Anti-slavery international are on the forefront in the struggle for protection of human rights, bonded labour, child labourers, indigineous population, tribal and other down trodden section all over the world. World known human right crusader and social reformer and the champion of bonded labourer in India, Swami Agnivesh is chairing this session. I am thankful to him.

We have Mr. Ehsan Ulla Khan, the Chairperson of Bonded Labour Liberation Front of Pakistan, Mr. Prakash Kafley, the Secretary General of Human Rights Protection Organisation, Nepal, Gauri Pradhan, Director of Child Workers in Nepal concern centre, Mr. Sushil Pyakural, Co-ordinator Board member of ACFOD from Nepal and a large number of eminent social activists, jurists and eminent academicians from our country.

On behalf of 300 thousands Carpet Children and dozens of dedicated social activists engaged to wipe out the scourge of child servitude, I welcome all of you.

I recall the first episode of liberation of 27 bonded child labourer 8 years ago. These miserable boys were kept in bondage by a loom owner in Belveria Village, near Mirzapur, they were branded with red hot iron rod, if they asked to go back to their homes. They were hung upside down on a jack fruit tree and beaten by stones bound in a piece of cloth, if they cried for their mothers. The youngest Suresh Mochi was only 6 years and the eldest was 11 years.

It was the first time, that the country, the Parliament and the Media could see the blood drops of young children in each knot of hand woven carpet. We, the Bandhua Mukhti Morcha filed a writ petition before the Hon'ble Supreme Court and then Justice Bhagwati ordered a commission of inquiry immediately.

India, Pakistan and Nepal are among the largest producers and exporters of hand-knotted carpets contributing roughly 2/3rd of the total world market. These beautiful artistic and cheap carpets are woven out of BLOOD, TENDER BONES and SWEAT of about 1 million child labourers engaged in carpet industry in this region. The total export of the south asian carpets is worth Rs.1500 crores annually.

Studies have revealed that 85% of the weavers are the children below 14 years. Majority of them come from the lowest rung of the society. They are mostly debt bonded labourers. Being major foreign currency earners, the carpet manufacturers/Traders enjoy the status of blue eyed boys of the Government. In spite of the Constitutional guarantees, specific laws and welfare schemes, all the rights of these poor children including the right of childhood and liberty are grossly violated in the South Asian carpet industry.

I have come across dozens of heart-rending incidents of child's slavery in the Mirzapur-Bhadohi belt in India, Lahore and Karachi in Pakistan and the outskirts of Kathmandu in Nepal, where the fateless carpet children were branded with red hot iron rods, poked with burning cigarette butts, hung upside down on the trees, beaten up severely, sexually abused, young girls were raped and then sold to the brothels. The dehumanising treatment of carpet child labour is a common phenomenon in South Asian countries.

Although the profit margin at all production and exports levels is huge, the majority of the children are either unpaid or given only subsistence wages. The reasons for employing the children are their physical and mental vulnerability as well as the fact that they are a source of cheapest labour. They could easily be forced to work 14 to 16 hours a day. Most of these children are suffering from respiratory problems, TB and other lung diseases due to continuous inhaling of woollen fluffs. Each child is exposed in the long run to other problems such as serious, vision problems, skin infections, deformations in the backbone, finger cuts, and continuous headaches. These problems are common in all Indian, Pakistani and Nepali carpet children.

Bandhua Mukhti Morcha in India, Bonded Labour Liberation Front in Pakistan, Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centres and INSEC in Nepal independent activists and NGOs have been struggling for the eradication of child labourers in the carpet industry. But unfortunately the gravity and magnitude of this pernicious system has been multiplying in itself.

Moreover, more than 20 thousand vulnerable Nepalese children have been introduced as bonded labourers by Indian Carpet Industry during the last 2-3 years. Bandhua Mukhti Morcha has been successful in liberating about 4000 bonded child labourer from Carpet Industry in India, but the number of child labour has doubled in these years.

In May 1990, when I was invited to Germany by a number of Human Rights Organisations, development groups on the occasion of its unification on some programmes on Human Rights issues, I availed this opportunity to highlight the plight of Carpet Child Labourers and launched a carpet consumers awareness campaign against child woven carpets. If they continue to buy these carpets, it means perpetuating this menace indirectly.

The aim of the campaign is to educate consumers and importers about the inhuman situation prevailing among child labourers and to generate pressure from foreign importers to demand only carpets produced by adults. The outcome was encouraging. The Indian Carpet Manufacturers Association agreed to abolish CHILD LABOUR conceding the VERY DEMAND of the NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS working in this field. But they have not done anything concrete. Such NGOs numbering about 12 have formed a COMMITTEE FOR ERADICATION OF CHILD LABOUR to pursue this issue vigorously.

As an encouraging response on my testimony before UN. Human Right Sub commission in 1991, the sub commission made a specific

recommendations:

- *119. Recommends that products such as carpets whose manufacture is liable to involve child labour should bear a special mark guaranteeing that they have not been produced by children. In this context, consumers should be alerted so that they will demand products bearing such a mark. In this end information campaign should be conducted with a view to the boycotting of all goods produced on the basis of the exploitation of child labour.

Meanwhile we had detailed and constructive dialogues with Non-Governmental organisations of Pakistan and Nepal and arrived at this resolution to organise a combined movement in the whole of South Asian Region. Social activists and the public unitedly have to mobilise movements against CHILD abuse and Exploitation. In South Asia several MULTI-NATIONAL COMPANIES namely E. Hill, Eastern Kayam, OBETE etc. are systematically exploiting Children and minting Crores of rupees. The sad part is that our Government in its avariciousness to bring in FOREIGN EXCHANGE are encouraging these exploiters. In order to pressurise these exploiting agencies we need to mobilise a vehement mass movement.

The lack of Political and administrative will are on the same pedestal as far as the South Asian Countries like India, Pakistan and Nepal are concerned. Though our Governments expect the co-operation of the Social Activists in eradicating CHILD LABOUR their these rhetorics are hollow. In reality Social Activists are being physically attacked and disinformation campaign is launched against them. Government remains a silent witness. We have not come across with a single instance where one Child exploiter is being prosecuted.

This CONSULTATION envisages to be the first stepping stone to jointly raise our voice to prevent the European and American consumers from incurring the sin of buying these carpets smeared with BLOOD and SWEAT of the CHILDREN. We would vociferously urge the European Governments who respect HUMAN RIGHTS and show great concern to protect, to take the initiative in wiping out this menace. □