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ADDRESS ON "CHILD LABOUR IN CARPET INDUSTRY IN INDIA"

By

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I must thank "Bread For the World" and Terre des Hommes for sponsoring an Experts' Consultation on the working conditions in the Indian carpet industry at Frankfurt on 18th May, 1992. This forum would enable the Human Rights Organisations, Trade Unions, Carpet importers and other dignitaries dedicated to the cause of child labour to have exchange of experiences and views on exploitation of child labour in carpet industry in India and to evolve strategies and efficacious measures to curb this evil system in this sector. It needs no emphasis that a success in this area would set an example for other countries especially in the Third World, which too bear the blemish of inhuman exploitation of child labour.

Through this paper I shall attempt to give an account of our struggle and efforts towards elimination of child labour in carpet industry in India. In this long march towards our mission, we have covered a number of milestones of which description you will find in the succeeding pages. What level we have reached today perhaps this would have not been possible without the support and involvement of Bread For the World, TDH, Anti-Slavery International, Novib and other NGOs and Associations and their valuable contribution will find a prominent place in the history of emancipation of bonded child labour in carpet industry in India. I express my heartfelt gratitude to them for rendering us all support and encouragement in this formidable task and look forward to its continuation in our arduous long march to the mission.

The thrust of our campaign is on the Mirzapur-Bhadohi carpet belt, a mega production centre claiming 90 per cent of the total production of this commodity in the country. Similarly, in exports, it shares a large segment say 80 to 85 per cent.

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Work Force and Working Conditions

It is estimated that there are 300 thousand children in carpet industry spread over in Mirzapur-Badhohi area, Kashmir, Agra, Jaipur (Rajasthan). In the Mirzapur and Bhadohi belt 150 thousand child labourers are employed mostly in bondage.

The children work in squalid huts of the loom owners. These also constitute as their dwelling places. Their working hours are from 14-16 hours a day stretching to late evening. They are victims of mal-nutrition. They are provided coarse rice and watery dal twice a day. A medical sample survey reveals that 50 per cent child labour are anemic. They are suffering from worm infestation, skin infection and respiratory problems due to woollen fibres are common. Life of such a child reduced to 10 to 20 years due to continuous inhaling wool fluffs and chemicals.

These children are subjected to harsh treatment - beaten for any fault in manufacturing or raising any voice for liberty and wages. Sometimes these children are slung upside down on a truck of tree. Burning of their skin by burning cigarette butts are reported.

The atrocities on girl child have been extreme in this area. We recovered some time back 8 girls from captivity of loom owner who were subjected to gang rape and other inhuman treatments.

These children are either not paid any wages or given a pittance amount as wages. They are treated as slaves. In some cases mortgage of children has come down to 2nd and 3rd generation. All these are spine chilling characteristics of this industry.

Enrolment of the Children

Trade and manufacturers of the industry have always been maintaining fallacious grounds for employment of children. They

primarily advancing nimble fingers theory for turning out quality products and secondly opening of avenue for the employment of the children of the poverty stricken families. In reality, they have drafted children into this industry being cheap labour with an additional advantage of being mute most vulnerable, physically & mentally. The trade has admitted in a number of meetings that quality products are made by adults.

Consumer Awareness Campaign

We have been endeavouring to curb child employment in this industry for the last one decade and been facing a number of hurdles in the mission. We have got about 4000 bonded children released from this sector so far after going through a lot of ordeals organising raids at the premises of loom owners with the help of local authorities and sometimes knocking at the doors of the highest Temple of Justice (Supreme Court) for release of bonded labour. Bihar is the main catchment area for fishing out children of the poor families of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes by unscrupulous contractors, middlemen kidnappers etc.

On one hand we could liberate a small number of child bonded labourers, but on the other hand, the multiple number of children are entering into industry. Thus we conceived of another strategy by which we could penetrate deeper to dismantle the web of inhuman exploitation of child labour. Thus we proceeded to initiate a consumers' awareness campaign (a proven instrument) against child abuse in the industry in some of major importing countries.

Thus, we started seeking the support of foreign importers, traders, consumers, NGOs - upholders of Human rights so as to discourage purchase of carpets made by children. In this course, Bandhua Mukti Morcha in May, 1990 floated this proposition among NGOs, intellectuals, journalists by direct dialogues and through TV, Press etc. in Europe.

Bread for the World (German) and Terree des Homes German Trade Union. Anti-Slavery International, U.K., have involved themselves seriously in this campaign. As a result of their persistent efforts in this direction by holding dialogues with foreign importers, press statements and carrying out propaganda at various meets/forums, this campaign seemed to have picked up as evidenced by other indicators. These are namely fall in the export of Indian carpets to European countries and change in the attitude of Exporters/Traders/Manufacturers to hold a dialogue with Bandhua Mukti Morcha for eradication of child labour in the industry.

This movement seems to have got wings entered into the corridors of UNO as borne out by the fact that UN Human Rights Sub-Commission has espoused this seal system on carpets as a measure of eradication of child labour in carpet industry in one of its recent reports. Its excerpts are :

- "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 campaigns should be conducted with a view to the boycotting of all goods produced on the basis of the exploitation of child labour."

It is gratifying to learn that foreign big importers have shown a great concern on child abuse in this industry and they have started pressurising Indian counterparts to manufacture carpets free of child labour.

Achievements in the Area

As a result of these persistent efforts, a growing realization among the Indian exporters to come to dialogue with Bandhua Mukti Morcha to thrash this crucial issue. It needs no emphasis that earlier they had shown the stance of indifference and hostility for

any move in finding solution of this issue. We have convened three meetings with them and the last meeting held on 17th December, 1991 in New Delhi was historic one and joint declaration was made for eradication of child labour in carpet industry. The salient outcome was :

- (1) By 31st March, 1992 all bonded and migrant child labourers to be liberated and returned back to their families. All India Carpet Manufacturers Association and Carpet Export Promotion Council announced not to issue export certificate and pass on export orders to those manufacturers who continue to employ bonded/migrant children after this date.
- (2) A joint committee consisting of 12 representative of NGOs and 12 from carpet manufacturers/exporters Association has been formed to further formulate and monitor activities to :
 - (i) eradicate child labour in carpet manufacture.
 - (ii) replace child labour by the employment of adults at appropriate wages.
- (3) Another remarkable achievement is that about 30 carpet manufacturers predominantly from Mirzapur region breached from their old Association and formed a 'Carpet Manufacturers Association without the use of child labour' and committed themselves strictly to the production of carpet by adults only. The concerned NGO's and this new 'Association' is working out on the feasible strategy, methodology and monitoring of seal system. One of the idea emerged as to register it on a trade mark and a joint committee comprising NGOs, manufacturers/exporters, trade unions and Human Rights Organisations could be formed and authorised for monitoring.

We are pained to point out that there are no visible signs of flag off the migrant children to their native homes by AICMA and carpet manufacturers though the target date (31-3-1992) is already over. Rather disheartening news are pouring in that there is further influx of children into this industry. However, we still feel that AICMA and its associates will honour their commitment made in this regard in their historic meeting of 17th December, 1991.

Internal Campaign

To give a support to our external consumer awareness campaign, we made a vigorous drive to enlist support of NGOs engaged in Mirzapur-Badhohi area. They are about 12 organisations in the area who have joined us in our mission.

For formulation of action plans, strategies and effective coordination and efficacious operation at the field level a two tier formation of NGOs committee has been constituted as under:

I. NATIONAL COMMITTEE:

(a) To formulate policies and approaches for the movement, monitoring of progress, documentation etc. This Committee shall hold dialogues, meetings with AICMA, manufacturers, etc. on the issue of Eradication of Child Labour. It shall also conduct negotiations/liaison with Govt.

(b) Seal Affixing: It will involve in labelling exercise on carpet for export and take steps for registration under Trade Mark Act. For this purpose, the task force comprising NGOs, trade and manufacturers representatives and other experts has been envisaged. Preliminary exercises in this regard have already been started.

(c) Rehabilitation: To curb malpractices in rehabilitation schemes of State Governments, the committee will intervene in such programmes and invite NGOs of the

States to associate with it in this activity. Negotiations have been started with the State Government of Bihar on rehabilitation of the children released from this industry.

- II. **REGIONAL COMMITTEE:** A Regional Committee of NGOs, trade unions etc. has been constituted with Dr. R.K. Rai as its Convenor. The Committee is entrusted to carry out inspection of carpet manufacturing units in the belt to satisfy that child labour is not involved - a pre-requisite for certification as free of child labour. It will monitor the operation and provide feed back to headquarter regularly and promptly. This committee has started working. It is negotiating with the manufacturers who have resolved to produce carpets free of child labour for carrying out inspection of their units.

The Committee demands a complete eradication of child labour in carpet industry and its replacement by adult workers. It also urges the Government of Germany and the importers of that country to discourage import of carpets made by children. It also calls upon the other importing countries to take note of the recommendations made by UN Sub-Group as spelt out earlier and take necessary steps as suggested therein.

Still there is an imperative need to create further pressure on Indian exporters to take steps for elimination of child labour in this industry as committed by them in their meeting held on 17th December, 1991.

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