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ILO to Consider Sweeping Universal Ban on Worst Forms of Child Labor

**New legal instruments would require immediate action against slavery,
Sexual exploitation, sale, trafficking, and hazardous work by children**

A telephone interview with an ILO child labor expert in Geneva can be arranged by calling 703-820-2244, or by calling ILO press spokesman Tom Netter at 011-4122-799-7973.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), at its annual conference here in June, is expected to adopt a new international convention aimed at an immediate, universal ban on the worst forms of child labour that still afflict millions of children worldwide, and in some cases appear to be worsening.

“The nightmarish vision of girls and boys toiling in mines, sold for prostitution and pornography, enslaved and trafficked like chattel or exposed to hazardous work has pushed child labor to the top of the international agenda,” said Mr. Juan Somavia, the Director-General of the ILO. “Ending these exploitative practices is one of the most important issues of our time.”

At the 87th session of the International Labour Conference (ILC), meeting on 1-17 June 1999, government, worker and employer representatives from 174 ILO member States are expected to conclude a multi-year, global effort to build an international consensus for a new Convention and Recommendation targeting such practices as child slavery, forced labour, trafficking, debt bondage, serfdom, prostitution, pornography as well as various forms of hazardous and exploitative work.

The proposed new standards were first discussed at the 1998 Conference and apply to all children under the age of 18. According to ILO estimates, some 250 million children between the ages of five and 14 work in developing countries alone. About half, or some 120 million work full time, while the rest combine work and schooling.¹ In some cases, as many as 68 percent of these children are engaged in hazardous work.

ILO surveys indicate that some 50 to 60 million children between the ages of five and 11 are working worldwide, in circumstances that could be termed hazardous due to their age and vulnerability.

The worst forms of child labor include:

- All forms of slavery and practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, forced or compulsory labor, debt bondage and serfdom;
- The use, procurement or offering of a child for prostitution, production of pornography or pornographic performances;
- The use, procurement or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs;
- Work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to jeopardize the health, safety or morals of children.

“The capacity to eradicate the worst forms of child labor is a moral test facing all societies,” Mr. Somavia said.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children is one of the most brutal forms of child exploitation, and appears to be worsening. Child victims suffer extreme physical, psychosocial and emotional abuse, are exposed to sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS and others, and are often introduced to drugs. Younger and younger children are being sought for the sex

¹ From “Targeting the intolerable: A new international Convention to eliminate the worst forms of child labour,” an information kit prepared by the International Labour Office, 1999. ISBN 92-2-111669-7, available from the ILO Working Conditions and Environment Department (Tel: 41-22) 799-6486, Fax: (451-22) 799-6349, E-mail: TRAVAIL@ilo.org), or on the World Wide Web at <http://www.ilo.org/childlabour>.

trade in the belief that they are more likely to be “AIDS free”, while sex tourism and pornography involving young girls and boys is flourishing, especially on the Internet.

Another area where the situation appears to be worsening is in the sale and trafficking of children across national borders by organized networks. Children are trafficked for prostitution and for hazardous jobs in construction, small shops, factories and domestic service. In many cases, children in these situations are confined to the workplace and treated like slaves.

“As economies decline, more children are sent to work, trafficked or abused in other ways,” Mr. Somavia said. “Often, this affects children as young as five who thus suffer to a greater degree because of their youth, their inexperience and their vulnerability.”

Youngest workers and hazardous work

Based on ILO surveys, it can be said that about one quarter of all the children in aged five to 14 developing countries are economically active. However, the most vulnerable children are those in the 5-11 age group.

Among these younger children, ILO surveys found that the younger they are, the more vulnerable they are to workplace hazards and economic exploitation. The ILO’s recent surveys indicate that children aged five to 11 and engaged in economic activities may total between 50 and 60 million around the world.

If children involved in full or near full-time housekeeping activities in their own parents’ households were included, the total number would be much higher. Also among these younger children, working girls outnumber working boys--close to three girls for every two boys.

Being more vulnerable physically, these children are more likely to suffer various work-related injuries and illnesses than adults doing the same kind of work. Moreover, because they are not yet mentally mature, they are less aware--and often completely unaware--of the potential risks involved in their specific occupations or at the workplace itself.

National surveys confirm that many of these young children suffer injuries while working or fall ill due to the work they do. These maladies include punctures, broken or complete loss of body

parts, burns and skin disease, eye and hearing impairment, respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses, fever, headaches from excessive heat in the fields or in factories.

Although the proportion of children working in mining, construction or transport is very small, these three sectors, particularly mining and construction, are by far the most dangerous for working children (e.g., 16 percent in mining, 26 percent in construction and 18 percent in transport).

Many young children work very long hours per day, in some cases six or seven days per week, especially in rural areas. Some national surveys indicate that more than a third of the children work more than 40 hours per week, with more than one in ten working 56 hours or more. In many instances, the girls work longer hours than the boys, particularly girls engaged in paid or unpaid domestic work.

Need for new standards

The ILO's Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), is the fundamental international standard on child labor and will remain the bedrock of national and international action for its total abolition. The number of ratifications has been increasing over the last couple of years. Currently, 72 States have ratified the Convention.

Convention No. 138 is aimed at the total abolition of child labor. While it is widely recognized that this will take years, a growing international consensus has emerged that there should be an immediate end to the worst forms of child labor. The new standards will identify priority areas for action, focus on the worst forms of child labor, ensure immediate action irrespective of the level of development, provide special protection for younger children and girls, and urge global cooperation and action. (See Box on provisions of the proposed draft Convention and Recommendations)

A number of issues remain to be considered during the second discussion of the proposed Convention and Recommendation. These involve whether the definition of the worst forms of child labor should include an explicit reference to children in armed combat or military activity; whether work which denies children access to education should be deemed as a worst form of

child labor; the definition of hazardous work; and the role of NGOs and other concerned groups in the Convention.

Child labor worldwide

While most child labor is found in developing countries, industrialized countries are not entirely child labor-free. In Eastern and Central Europe, for example, child labor has been reappearing in the wake of social and economic dislocation caused by the transition to a market economy. And even among countries of the European Union and in North America, there is evidence that the phenomenon has not entirely disappeared.

In absolute terms, Asia, as the most densely populated region of the world, has the most child workers. Of the global total, 61 percent are in Asia, 32 percent in Africa and 7 percent in Latin America. In relative terms, however, Africa leads in the proportion of working children, with an estimated 41 percent of the total number of children aged between five and 14 working, compared to 22 percent in Asia and 17 percent in Latin America.

Globally, more boys than girls work, by an average ratio of three to two. With 37 percent, Africa has the highest participation rate of girls among developing regions of the world.

However, surveys do not take into account domestic work in one's own household or caring for sick or disabled family members. Girls perform this work more so than boys — many between the ages of eight and 12. If such work were included, the number of boys and girls working would be equal, and according to some estimates, might show that more girls than boys are working.

Domestic work can be as hazardous as labor outside the home. Many child domestics put in up to 15 hours per day, are frequently unpaid, must carry heavy loads, or shoulder the responsibility of caring for even younger children. They may suffer physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Once their services are no longer needed, some are simply put on the street, without food, clothing or shelter.

Girls face special hazards, often bearing a triple burden of housework, schoolwork and economic work. They are more likely to begin working at an earlier age, be paid less, and work more hours than boys. They face greater exposure to exploitation and abuse, both physical and sexual, as well as dangers to their health, safety and welfare. Often, girls are denied access to any form of schooling.

IPEC and hazardous work

The International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) is the world's largest technical co-operation programme on child labor, an alliance of more than 90 donor and recipient countries. In more than 60 countries, IPEC guides and supports national initiatives to eliminate child labor by strengthening national capacities to address the problem and creating a world-wide movement to combat it.

Since its inception in 1992, IPEC has signed agreements with 36 countries establishing formal country programmes. In a further 29 countries, agreements involving projects are in preparation or being negotiated. In the past five years, nearly half (47 percent) of IPEC's programmes involved children in hazardous work and 10 percent children in forced labor conditions. IPEC has organized programmes focussing on some of the worst forms of child labor including trafficking of children, prostitution, children in bondage, as well as in such sectors as domestic work, mining, quarrying, manufacturing and fireworks production.

IPEC is engaged in action against child trafficking in eight Asian countries, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam. In Nepal, for example, IPEC worked with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to assist the government, NGOs, workers and employers' organizations in the removal and rehabilitation of "kamiya" children, or children of bonded laborers and the prevention and elimination of child labor in carpet production, brick kilns, stone quarries, hotels and restaurants.

In Central America, IPEC helped launch direct action programmes to assist children working in prostitution in Costa Rica, stone quarries in Guatemala and agriculture in the Dominican Republic. An action programme to combat child labor in the Peruvian mining industry has withdrawn children as young as six from gold mines where they worked without protection from

accidents or injuries, and helped put them in schools. In Africa, IPEC has worked with countries to eliminate commercial sexual exploitation by children in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Meanwhile, in countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Madagascar, Mali and Senegal, IPEC is working with local authorities to tackle the problem of children working in hazardous conditions, including quarries and mines, as scavengers, in severe domestic situations, and in some workshops.

“Through IPEC, we hold in our hands the tools we need to organize large-scale, time-bound and effective programmes against child labor the world over,” Mr. Somavia concluded. “But we must attack the worst forms of child labor now. Adoption of these new standards will give us the legal and moral power to do so.”

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Box 1:
Fact and figures on global child labor

Estimates on the extent of the worst forms of child labor vary widely. However, within the broad range of estimates, there are some indications emerging, which though general provide some idea of the overall magnitude.

- According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, one million children in Asia are estimated to be involved in the **sex trade**, often under conditions indistinguishable from slavery
- In some countries, as many as 30 per cent of all **prostitutes** are estimated to be under the age of 18
- Tens of millions of people are estimated to be subjected to **various forms of slavery and bondage**, a good number of them children
- In some countries, nearly 70 percent of working children are engaged in work which is hazardous

Box 2:
Proposed Convention

Ratifying States are to:

- Apply the Convention to children under 18;
- Take measures to prohibit and immediately eliminate the worst forms of child labor;
- Designate monitoring mechanisms;
- Adopt programs of action;
- Ensure effective enforcement, including penal or other sanctions;
- Take measures for prevention, removal, rehabilitation and social reintegration;
- Take account of the special situation of girls;
- Take steps to assist each other through international cooperation or assistance.