

Tuesday 12 May 2009

ILO/09/00

EMBARGO:

For publication/broadcast on or after 1100 GMT

**NEW ILO REPORT SAYS “COST OF COERCION” TO WORKERS IN FORCED
LABOUR SURPASSES USD 20 BILLION PER YEAR**

GENEVA (ILO News) – In a new study on the patterns of forced labour worldwide, the International Labour Office (ILO) says the “opportunity cost” of coercion to the workers affected reaches over USD 20 billion per year.

The report, entitled *The Cost of Coercion*¹, also details the growing number of unethical, fraudulent and criminal practices that can lead people into situations of forced labour, and calls for increased efforts to eradicate the practices.

The report also charts the significant progress on the international and national levels in reducing and preventing forced labour,² but warns of the possible impact of the global economic and jobs crisis.

“Forced labour is the antithesis of decent work,” said ILO Director-General Juan Somavia. “It causes untold human suffering and steals from its victims. Modern forced labour can be eradicated, providing there is a sustained commitment by the international community, working together with government, employers, workers and civil society.”

Moreover, the report estimates that the “opportunity cost” of coercion to the workers affected by these abusive practices, in terms of lost earnings, now reaches over USD 20 billion. This presents a powerful economic argument, as well as a moral imperative, as to why governments must now accord higher priority to these concerns.

Noting that it was being issued amid the worst economic and financial crisis for many decades, the ILO report added that “in such a crisis situation, it is the vulnerable who suffer the most. At such times it is all the more necessary to ensure that adjustments are not made at the expense of the safeguards that have been painstakingly put in place to prevent forced labour and trafficking abuse in supply chains”.

The study paints a mixed picture of global efforts to combat forced labour. While most countries have introduced legislation that deals with forced labour as a

¹ « The cost of coercion, » Global Report under the follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work 2009, International Labour Office, Geneva, ISBN 978-92-2-120628-6

² The previous ILO report on forced labour published in 2004 provided figures showing that some 12.3 million persons worldwide were in some form of forced labour or bondage. Of these, 9.8 million were exploited by private agents, including more than 2.4 million in forced labour as a result of human trafficking.

criminal offence and the issue itself is no longer hidden or taboo, others are finding it difficult to identify cases of abuse, let alone define the adequate policy responses.

The report points out that among the intensified international and national efforts to reduce and prevent forced labour, are new laws and policies at national and regional level as well as a growing provision of social protection for those most at risk of forced labour and trafficking.

“Most forced labour is still found in developing countries, often in the informal economy and in isolated regions with poor infrastructure, labour inspection and law enforcement,” the report says. “This can only be tackled through integrated policies and programmes, mixing law enforcement with proactive measures of prevention and protection, and empowering those at risk of forced labour to defend their own rights.”

“We must never forget that forced labour is a serious criminal offence that requires criminal punishment” said Roger Plant, head of the ILO’s Special Action Programme to combat Forced Labour. “But we must also remember that forced labour is often poorly defined in national legislation, making it difficult to address the multiple subtle ways in which workers can be denied their freedom. The challenge is to address these problems in an integrated way, through prevention and law enforcement, using both labour and criminal justice”.