

ILO Director General's Message

Juan Somavia – 11 May 2005

Launch of "A Global Alliance Against Forced Labour"

Today the ILO is pleased to launch *A Global Alliance against Forced Labour*.

We believe that this is the most comprehensive analysis ever undertaken on the facts and underlying causes of contemporary forced labour. It contains the first global and regional estimates by an international organization of forced labour in the world today, including the number of persons affected, as well as the profits made by those exploiting trafficked workers.

The report is also a call for action, on a fundamental human rights concern that is still insufficiently understood and poorly documented. Arguing that forced labour presents a challenge to virtually every country in the world, the report also says that forced labour can be abolished. It calls for a global alliance to stop forced labour through mobilization of political will, the enforcement of existing or strong laws and policies, and the linkage of such efforts with effective prevention strategies.

Before sharing the main findings, we should explain what the ILO means by forced labour. Forced labour cannot be equated with poor working conditions, or with low wages. Persons are in forced labour when they undertake work or a service against their will, and when they are subject to a penalty or sanction if they try to get out of it. Forced labour can be imposed by the State, by rebel groups or the military, or by private agents.

There are at least 12.3 million victims of forced labour in the world today. Moreover forced labour is a major global problem, present in all regions and in all types of economies.

Although many may still tend to think of forced labour as state abuse against its citizens - with images of gulags and similar horrors - our research indicates that four out of five forced labourers are in the grip of private agents who operate mainly in the underground economy.

And it is also very big business. Our report has found that trafficking in human beings generates an estimated 32 billion US dollars in profits - exceeding the Gross Domestic Product of over 100 countries. Nearly half these profits are made in the world's wealthiest countries. And by far the highest sums are made from forced commercial sexual exploitation.

The challenges of addressing forced labour are daunting. Most forced labour today exists in the developing world, where victims come from the poorest economic and social groups. They are often without assets other than their labour. They are constantly on the move. They are very frequently from social groups - indigenous peoples in Latin America, caste or religious minorities in Asia, and the descendants of slaves in Africa - who have long endured discrimination on the labour market as well as extreme poverty.

In the industrialized world, forced labour is a growing challenge. The numbers may be far smaller than in the developing countries but the trends are disturbing. Most forced labour is the outcome of human

trafficking for sexual exploitation, or for other economic exploitation often in the "underground" economy.

Various dynamics of the global economy - the growth of the unregulated informal economy, rising income inequalities, chronic unemployment and underemployment - can contribute to the forced labour trap. Migrant workers lured by potential salaries far larger than what they could expect in their home countries are trapped by debts owed to their contractors. And where there are inadequate controls over subcontracting chains, there are growing risks that coercive practices can affect migrant workers even in mainstream economic sectors.

There are encouraging signs of progress. The first national action plans against forced and bonded labour have been established in Brazil and Pakistan. A number of countries have adopted new legislation or amended their criminal law to address the forced labour dimensions of trafficking.

But far too often, forced labour remains an invisible crime, largely hidden from view and prosecution. Governments are sometimes reluctant to probe into and recognize its existence.

Victims themselves may be unwilling to come forward fearing not only reprisals from their exploiters but perhaps also action against them by immigration and other law enforcement authorities.

Eradicating forced labour remains a complex challenge. But it is an essential ingredient to building an inclusive global economy. Getting there will require action from many fronts simultaneously.

Our messages to decision makers are straightforward. Face up to forced labour. Tackle the root causes embedded in patterns of discrimination, deprivation and poverty. Place the abolition of forced labour high on national priorities for human rights and development, such as poverty reduction strategies and processes. Identify when labour market characteristics-including inadequate regulation and weak or non-existent labour inspection - are facilitating the growth of new forms of forced labour.

Adopt clear legislation, enabling all concerned employers' and workers' organizations as well as the general public to understand the parameters of forced labour. Provide law enforcement agents the capacity and resources to implement laws and policies and to identify, track down, prosecute and punish offenders. Establish national programmes to end forced labour within a set time frame and give those initiatives extensive publicity to raise awareness and mobilize society. In all of these ways, we can make a real dent in forced labour and build a global alliance that ends this scourge once and for all.

Everyone has a stake in this fight. Responsible companies want to ensure that they won't find forced labour at the end of a complex chain of contractors and sub contractors. Consumers want to have the peace of mind that the products they buy do not come at the price of victimizing workers. Countries need citizens engaged in productive work that leads to sustainable development. And global security ultimately depends on people having access to decent work.

Above all, individuals demand and deserve the dignity to live and work in freedom that is the fundamental right of every human being.

It's time to step up action against a social evil that has no place in the modern world. To achieve a fair globalization and decent work for all, it is imperative to eradicate forced labour.