



## *Forced Labour: Facts and Figures*



# The Cost of Coercion: Regional Perspectives

## Asia

Asia accounts for by far the biggest share of the world's forced labourers. Many are migrants, either from elsewhere in Asia or their home country. The ILO currently views three issues with particular concern:

- Persistence of bonded labour systems, particularly in South Asia, despite longstanding legislation to ban and punish such practices as well as efforts to identify, release and rehabilitate bonded labourers.
- Widespread trafficking of children and adults, for both sexual and labour exploitation.
- Continued use of forced labour by the State and official institutions, notably in Myanmar.

Research has also shown the existence of forced labour in sectors that had escaped previous attention, including Thailand's shrimp, fishing and seafood processing industries and shrimp production in Bangladesh.

### **The Challenge of Bonded Labour**

Bonded labour exists in a range of sectors, including both those facing extreme competitive pressures, such as handloom weaving and rice mills, and those expanding rapidly, such as brick kilns and stone quarrying. Bonded labourers, and sometimes their families, lose their freedom to choose employment through a system of loans or advance payments for work.

In Tamil Nadu, India, for example, labour agents (maistries) pay substantial wage advances to brick kiln workers at the start of a season, often equivalent to three to seven months of a family's earnings. Work days can last up to 16 hours and there is a six-day week. At the end of the season, when piece rate wages are calculated, these often do not cover the advance, obliging workers to return to the same kiln the following season. Meanwhile, labour agents receive a commission from kiln owners on every thousand bricks produced.

Bonded labour is also found in Nepal, including in the Haliya or "tiller" system affecting an estimated 20,000 people in far western Nepal. It also persists in Pakistan, especially in the agricultural and brick-kiln sectors.

Recent years have seen some progress in improving the situation of bonded labourers. Unionization of brick kiln workers has increased wages in some cases, with unionized workers in Punjab, India earning up to one-quarter more than official wages and receiving benefits including health care.

Moreover, the ILO is working with Indian government and state authorities along with worker and employer organizations on a programme in Tamil Nadu. Among the objectives are to make the advance payment system more transparent and to improve social protection and working conditions. The government of Punjab province in Pakistan is also, with ILO support, embarking on an integrated programme to combat bonded labour in brick kilns.

## **Exploitative Practices**

Abusive recruitment systems exist throughout Asia, affecting both internal migrants and those moving greater distances from their home country or region to places such as the Gulf States and the U.S.

Much recruitment, whether through private agencies or informal networks, is inadequately regulated, with unlawful activities such as human trafficking all too frequent. Also of concern, however, are coercive practices that may not be explicitly against the law. These include payments to recruiters that can result in severe indebtedness over long periods.

Some of the highest recruitment payments in the world are found in China, with research showing that workers can pay as much as 2.5 times their expected annual income in recruitment fees to obtain jobs in the U.S. In Indonesia, meanwhile, domestic workers in holding centres sign documents before departure indicating their willingness to have salary deductions paid directly by the employer to the recruitment agency. In some cases these payments account for as much as 90 per cent of the worker's salary during the first five months of overseas employment.

Such situations point to a need for better official oversight of recruitment agencies and their practices. Moreover, the establishment of more legally regulated agencies could make informal systems that are outside the law less attractive to workers and employers.

ILO research in China has found other coercive practices that constitute different forms of forced labour. These include confinement of workers, employees forced into hazardous working conditions (especially in mining), some cases of compulsory overtime that amount to forced labour and unlawful deductions or withholding of wages by employers and recruiting agents. A new labour contract law was recently adopted, prohibiting these forms of forced labour. Moreover, penal laws have been progressively amended to punish the exaction of different forms of forced labour. With ILO assistance, Chinese employers' organizations have addressed forced labour through self-regulation and the adoption of a new Code of Practice Preventing Forced Labour and Trafficking in Persons. Capacity building has also been provided to Chinese workers' organizations to identify and provide protection for victims of forced labour.

## **Forced Labour in Myanmar**

Under an accord between the ILO and the government of Myanmar in 2007, the ILO's Liaison Officer has been able to receive, examine and assess complaints of forced labour. The officer's findings are then relayed to the government for investigation as well as to the ILO Governing Body, which also is kept informed about the outcome of the complaint. The agreement is part of the ILO's longstanding drive against the use of forced labour by the authorities in Myanmar. As of November 2008, 120 complaints had been received, 70 of which were assessed as falling under the definition of forced labour. Of these, 21 were cases of forced labour under the orders of civil authorities, 10 involved forced labour under the military authorities and 39 involved recruitment of minors into the military.

## **Special Action Programme to combat Forced Labour**

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