



Forced Labour: Facts and Figures



The Cost of Coercion: Regional Perspectives

Americas

Latin America accounts for the second largest number of forced labourers in the world after Asia, according to ILO estimates. Those most at risk are migrant workers in sweatshops, agriculture and domestic service. The main form of forced labour is through debt bondage, involving informal and unlicensed intermediaries who pay advances to entice workers and then reap profits through inflated charges.

Forced labour in Latin America is closely linked to patterns of inequality and discrimination, especially against indigenous peoples. As a result, action to combat forced labour must be part of a broad framework of measures and programmes aimed at reducing poverty by fighting discrimination and promoting the rights of indigenous peoples as well as helping poorest workers in urban areas.

Intensified Efforts

Awareness about the extent of forced labour is now growing in Latin America, although only a few countries have made systematic efforts to investigate and document its incidence. Efforts by two of these – Brazil and Peru – have helped improve understanding of contemporary forced labour and its underlying causes.

Moreover, the drive against forced labour in Latin America includes coordinated policies and practical actions that aim to identify where forced labour exists and release forced labourers.

In Brazil, for example, legislation and government action has combined with initiatives involving employers, workers and civil society to step up the fight against forced labour. The Brazilian government publishes a “dirty list” of individual property owners and companies that have been identified as using forced labour. As of July 2008, the list contained the names of 212 people or enterprises, mainly in cattle raising.

In addition, the mobile inspections carried out by labour inspectors, prosecutors and federal police officers since 1995 continue to yield results, with a record of nearly 6,000 people freed in 2007 and just over 5,000 in 2008. More than 30,000 forced labourers have been released since the inspections began. Brazilian law also calls for the compensation of freed labourers.

Peru created a Special Labour Inspection Group against Forced Labour in August 2008, and its first investigation confirmed the existence of force labour in logging camps in the Amazon region of Loreto. Bolivia passed legislation in 2008 that calls for rural properties found to be using forced labour and debt bondage to be transferred to the state.

As well, In January 2007, a permanent tripartite National Commission against Forced Labour was created in Peru, to coordinate policies and actions at national and regional levels. The National Plan to Combat Forced Labour was officially launched by President García on 1 May 2007. Achievements include the creation of a division against human trafficking in the National Police, the inclusion of forced labour issues in the curriculum of the Ministry of Education, the introduction of severe sanctions for illegal logging, the elaboration of a communications strategy on forced labour, and extensive training of public servants and other key stakeholders.

In Argentina, there has been a crackdown against garment workshops following evidence that Bolivian men and their families were being trafficked for employment in the sector. Coercive practices include removal of identity documents, locking workers in factories and compelling them to work for up to 17 hours a day. After a factory fire killed several Bolivians in March 2006, a government inspection programme led to the closure of more than half of the workshops visited. The drive included the establishment of a telephone hotline “Slave Labour Kills” in April 2006.

Elsewhere in Latin America, abusive practices include compulsory overtime, with allegations that in Guatemala, for example, workers were threatened with dismissal for refusing to work shifts of up to 24 hours.

US and Canada Target Trafficking

In the United States and Canada, increased focus on human trafficking has brought to light more and more cases of forced labour among foreign workers, particularly in domestic service and agriculture. Both countries have introduced new task forces and strengthened law enforcement in the drive against trafficking.

For example, in the United States the inclusion in anti-trafficking legislation of a specific provision on forced labour has paved the way for a gradual increase in forced labour prosecutions in recent years. The United States has invested substantial resources in combating trafficking, both internationally and within the country. These include grants to assist law enforcement and expand victim assistance programmes.

Although many forced labourers in North America are migrants whose status is irregular, there are also indications that workers recruited by intermediaries under official “guestworker” programmes can end up in debt bondage situations where they are prevented from changing employers and endure extremely harsh working conditions.

Special Action Programme to combat Forced Labour

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