



**Advocating for the Rights
of Children Worldwide
Trust**

A World Fit For All Our Children...Or is it?

By Dinesh Menon

“Recall the face of the poorest person you have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be any use to them.”
– Mahatma Gandhi (to Indian policymakers)

While the privileged few who populate this world go about their daily lives, which tend to revolve around their jobs, their families, their homes, their several meals in a day, their education, and their need to pay careful homage to the various demands on their time and attention, there is a significant majority of humanity struggling to survive the next twenty-four hours, while long having forgone any semblance of basic human dignity. The least able among this underprivileged majority struggling to survive one day to the next, are the children. This article is about them.

While the world celebrates annually the United Nations (UN) designated International Day to Commemorate the Struggle Against Slavery and its Abolition on August 23rd, there are thousands of young girls and boys in Central America and Asia holed up in the bleakest brothels or facilities serving as such, effectively held against their will and deprived of the basic rights that are supposedly entrenched by the UN

Convention on the Rights of the Child. The reasons for these children to be found in such deplorable circumstances will undoubtedly vary. They are usually the silent victims of economic, political and social upheaval, which typically result in desperation to find any means of earning an income to meet their basic needs, and often the basic needs of their respective families.

A human rights organization called Casa Alianza undertook a nine month investigation into 264 of such establishments in Guatemala, and found hundreds of underage girls and young teenage minors from Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala effectively enslaved as prostitutes¹. These children are often duped into a life of slavery within a brothel, by those who seek to enrich themselves on these children's desperate need to survive and support their families. Sustaining a highly profitable “underground” industry of trafficking child prostitutes across international borders, they often evade the law long enough to significantly damage the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of a growing number of children. In a 3-day conference in 2004 in Panama, the UNESCO and UNICEF estimated upwards of 700 000 people a year are victims of people trafficking in the world.

While slogans like “slavery is against human dignity” are published at certain opportune times of the year and such topics are

¹ http://www.essex.ac.uk/armedcon/story_id/000211.html

discussed with a demeanour of grave concern during cocktail parties and social gatherings of the wealthy and well established, there are about 170 000 child domestic “workers” just in Central America. Many of whom are forced to work more than 12 or 14 hours each day, while denied their basic right to an education, to play or to even be with their families². There are child sugar cane cutters in El Salvador, children who make fireworks in Guatemala for other children to play with, deep sea diver children on the coast of Nicaragua, tea harvesting children in the vast tea plantations of Sri Lanka, silk weaving children in the cramped weaving huts found in the villages of India, just to name a few. There are enough reports documenting this widespread phenomenon to demonstrate the practice of slavery has not changed over the past 400 years, regardless of how much more civilized the human race is said to have become since its supposed rise from savagery.

It is worth noting that these inhumane practices are not merely confined to the economically and socially deprived communities of the world. The BBC News service reported on 8th November 2001 that “hundreds of West African children have been brought illegally into Britain and other European countries in a modern-day form of slavery”³. The same report adds these children are sent by penniless parents who readily agree for them to leave their home

for Britain to escape the extremely difficult circumstances they face, upon the express understanding they will be cared and provided for. Reality for these children upon arriving in Britain turns out to be very far from what their parents are promised. They are reportedly put to work around the home as domestic slaves and never set foot in a classroom. Some are said to be beaten and abused and others are said to end up as sexual playthings of paedophiles. The same report further adds these children are often used as a means to claim social benefits. At the time of this report, there were approximately 10 000 West African children living in Britain with strangers, with many of them acquired from ‘maid markets’ established in their home countries for as little as GBP5.

Reports such as this prompt one to enquire into the manner in which the relevant public authorities of Great Britain and Europe carry out their duly designated duties. This clearly demonstrates a glaring failure, which has in turn created fertile ground for such practices to take root and flourish to such an extent, we are eventually faced with thousands of underprivileged foreign children ending up as silent victims of inhumane practices within the borders of so-called “civilized” and “developed” nations. These same nations that, once upon a time, took it upon themselves to bring civilization to the rest of the “savage-ridden” world. While one accepts it is near impossible to have a society free of all social ills, there must be

² Ibid. Based on 2004 statistics

³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1644406.stm>

something fundamentally wrong with present administrative practices, processes and priorities if we end up with thousands of foreign children victimized and effectively enslaved within Britain, in the 21st century.

The Guardian reported on 29th May 2003 that thousands of street children in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, Guatemala City and San Salvador killed in summary executions, almost always go undetected and their perpetrators go unpunished. For instance, reports suggest an average of 40 such murders occur a month in Guatemala City. In February 2003, a body of a young man found in the Honduran city of San Pedro had the words “limpiando la ciudad” (“cleaning up the city”) scrawled on his bare shoulders in ballpoint ink⁴. Casa Alianza, a Central American organization that works with street children, claims many of the murders are a form of “social cleansing”, whereby vigilante groups and the police regard these deaths as others might regard the removal of vermin. While some of these deaths can be attributed to inter-gang feuds or murder over drug deals or territory, a significant proportion are believed to have been carried out by members of law enforcement agencies (both on and off duty), or by people hired by businesses frustrated at the escalating crime rate⁵. It was also reported that the youngest of the murder victims in February 2003, was merely 8 years old. It

has also been found, the children killed in this fashion are not just confined to street children or gang members.

According to Bruce Harris of Casa Alianza, the killing of children accelerates each year in Central America, because there is a general belief that one could “literally get away with murder”⁶. Government reaction to this problem, which has reached epidemic levels in certain Central American countries, has varied from country to country. According to Gustavo Zelaya of Casa Alianza, there is now at least some degree of recognition on the part of certain governments that there is a problem, and this has led to discussions. However, there is a vast gulf between discussion and action. For instance, Mr. Harris is reported to have opined that “There has been zero reaction from the Guatemala government”. This is consistent with a BBC News report in March 2003, wherein Amnesty International found that despite various efforts, the (Honduras) government has not managed to prosecute the killers of even a minimal number of the approximately 1 569 street children killed in the preceding five years, of which 556 were killed in 2002 alone⁷.

The stark reality is many of these countries have very limited resources which they have to allocate for various essential and often competing services, while straddled with significant social, political and economic

4 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print0,,4678880-103681,00.html>

5 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print0,,4678880-103681,00.html>

6 Ibid

7 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/2850869.stm>

problems that have a far reaching impact on social and economic stability. They also tend to be faced with epidemic levels of corruption, which has the effect of crippling many initiatives that are commenced with good and noble intentions. Nevertheless, reports and statistics such as these prompt one to reflect on the prevailing moral fabric of these communities and the world at large. It seems they and we continue to condone such abhorrent acts of violence against defenceless children, most of whom are already deprived of their basic needs, by doing little or nothing to halt such acts. The UNICEF, a United Nations organ established to promote and safe guard the welfare of children the world over, reported in April 2006 that for programs operating in 2006 it was faced with a shortfall of US\$1.7 million, out of a total of US\$4.8 million necessary for humanitarian actions⁸. According to a BBC News report in November 2001, the UNICEF found 18 million children in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union were living in conditions of extreme poverty, existing on less than US\$2.15 a day. Another 60 million children and young people were living on less than US\$4.30 a day⁹.

It is baffling how wealthy nations like the United States of America and the United Kingdom are able to justify invading a sovereign nation like Iraq, and consequently spend about US\$352 billion and GBP4.9 billion respectively on this endeavour, to

date, based on what is now widely reported to be largely fabricated or ill advised reasons, while tens of million of children exist in extremely impoverished conditions and humanitarian and social welfare organisations, like the UNICEF and Casa Alianza, remain inadequately funded, thus crippling their ability to plan and execute urgent projects and initiatives that seek to help those ill-able to help themselves. It is statistics such as these that bring to light the priorities our elected leaders have chosen to place above all else, and pursue without any regard for the far more pressing needs of those among us who are least able to fend for themselves.

The number of people internally displaced by the violence in Colombia is estimated by the UNICEF to be between 2.5 and 3.5 million, of which about half are children and adolescents¹⁰. Children in the rural communities around Colombia also suffer the effects of blockages and limited access to humanitarian assistance. The UNICEF also adds that around 7000 children in Colombia remain enrolled in non-State armed groups, and the recruitment of children and adolescents continues despite increases in the number of people demobilised¹¹. In Russia and Ukraine, the UNICEF found in 2001 one child in every seven is undernourished, while in Albania, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan this figure rises to one child in every three¹². This same report

8 http://www.unicef.org/media/media_33588.html

9 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1682369.stm>

10 http://www.unicef.org/media/media_33588.html

11 Ibid

12 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1682369.stm>

goes on to reveal falling educational standards among the children of Central Asia, where less than half of 15 to 18 year olds attend secondary schools, when ten years ago more than two thirds attended. Clearly evidence of such a significant fall in the number of children attending secondary level schooling over a ten year period across Central Asia, does not serve as evidence of progress.

Surely the bastions of liberty and freedom like the United States of America (“the US”), whose leaders have the tendency of lecturing others on the fundamental points of these hallowed tenets and even punishing other nations and their communities for failing to uphold these tenets, must be sterling exemplars of upholding these tenets themselves. In reality they appear to be little more than hypocrites, incapable of walking the talk and less than capable of putting their money where their collective mouths are. In a report by the Guardian in April 2003, children younger than 16 were found to be held as “enemy combatants” in the American detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba¹³. “Three boys aged between 13 and 15 are held among 660 adult inmates at the controversial camp”, a US military official told the Guardian, on condition of anonymity¹⁴.

Angela Wright of Amnesty International was quoted as saying the holding of children was

“wholly repugnant and contrary to basic principles of human rights and (it) contravened UN rules that have “near-universal acceptance” regarding the treatment of juveniles”¹⁵. Ironically, despite the stance the US takes with regard to lecturing other nations on the fundamental and finer points of liberty, democracy and freedom, the US and Somalia, are the only member states of the UN not to have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, since the US is a signatory, it has “an obligation not to defeat the object and purpose of the treaty”¹⁶. This Convention is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. It is also the most complete statement of children's rights ever made, providing an internationally agreed framework of minimum standards necessary for the well-being of the child, to which every child and young person under 18 is entitled. The detention of these children by the US is, without doubt, clearly at odds with the purpose of the Convention. The legal ramifications of this are uncertain, since many experts argue the US is already in breach of international law merely by holding these detainees indefinitely without trial or charge, irrespective of their ages.

Surely the UN and its various organs, in their extensive efforts to uphold, protect and preserve the fundamental rights and welfare of people all over the globe, can be trusted to fulfil these objectives? Yet, we find the very institution that is supposedly meant to

13 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,4653978-103681,00.html>

14 Ibid

15 Ibid

16 Ibid

uphold and protect the fundamental rights of people, regardless of age and creed, especially in instances where the governments of individual countries have grossly failed to do this for their own people, at times miserably fails the very people who look to it as their final hope. It has been widely reported over the last few years that UN peacekeepers deployed in socially and economically devastated countries, make use of their advantages to exploit the very people they have been tasked to protect from harm and abuse. There are reports of sexual abuse and misconduct by UN peacekeepers of children and underage refugees in Haiti, as recent as November 2006 by the BBC News service¹⁷. It was also reported by the Weekly Standard in March 2005, in a classified UN report the outgoing UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, admitted "UN peacekeepers and staff have sexually abused or exploited war refugees in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The worst of the 150 or so allegations of misconduct, some of them captured on videotape, include paedophilia, rape, and prostitution"¹⁸. This report goes on to add "various UN reports and interviews with humanitarian groups suggest that international peacekeeping missions are creating a predatory sexual culture among vulnerable refugees, (ranging) from relief workers who demand sexual favours in

exchange for food to UN troops who rape women at gunpoint"¹⁹.

It has also been found that "allegations of sexual abuse or misconduct by UN staff stretch back at least a decade, to operations in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea. A 2001 report, released by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Save the Children, found that sexual violence against refugees in West Africa was endemic"²⁰. This report goes on to establish that "the UN abuses are especially grievous in Congo, where sexual violence against women and children has been a weapon of war employed by most of the armies involved in the six-year-old conflict. Called "Africa's world war," it has involved militias from Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Rwanda, and Congo"²¹. While the outgoing UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, is reported to have "insisted on "zero tolerance" of sexual exploitation by peacekeepers, (it is interesting to note that) UN (regulations) apply only to UN employees; military personnel fall under the jurisdiction of their own governments. (As a result) only a few peacekeepers have been deported, and no UN staff have been charged with criminal activity"²² at the time of this report.

It goes without saying, the sexual abuses committed, or ignored, by UN personnel,

17 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/6159923.stm>

18 <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/005/081zxelz.asp>

19 Ibid

20 Ibid

21 Ibid

22 <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/005/081zxelz.asp>

violate the institution's Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To prey upon the very population, particularly the children of already devastated populations, that one has been sent to protect, must be one of the worst forms of violation and betrayal that there is. So who is to guard the guardian?

This article does not seek to carry out a comprehensive report of the abuse and travesties impacting the children of the world today. But it does seek to provide a glimpse of the challenges faced by a large number of children across the globe, at the hands of groups, institutions and organisations across a very wide spectrum, either by their actions

or their inaction. There are institutions like Casa Alianza, Amnesty International, and the UNICEF that continue to positively impact the circumstances of those they seek to assist, despite the challenges they face on a daily basis and the critical lack of resources they continue to contend with. But as has been made reasonably evident in this paper there is a lot more that needs to be done and that can be done for the welfare and the well being of children the world over, regardless of race, colour or creed. The progress and upward evolution of the human race is dependent upon ensuring no one is left behind or deprived of their journey to grow into a well-educated, loved and productive adult member of society. So the challenge remains to create a world fit for all our children.

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