

Malawi Child Workers With 2 Pack A Day Habit

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BLANTYRE, Malawi (AP) — Children picking tobacco in the fields of Malawi for consumers far beyond the African country's borders are being poisoned as they absorb up to two cigarette packs' worth of nicotine each day, a children's rights organization said Monday,

The "extremely high levels of nicotine poisoning" produces not only nausea, headaches, dizziness, difficulty in breathing and other symptoms but "long-lasting changes in brain structure and function," London-based Plan International said in a report.

It noted that large-tobacco production has shifted from the United States to developing countries like Malawi, where "children are being exposed to exploitative and hazardous working conditions."

More than 78,000 children, some as young as 5, work on tobacco estates across the southern African country, some up to 12 hours a day for less than 1.7 cents an hour and without protective clothing, the report asserted.

Entitled "Hard work, long hours and little pay," the report said workers absorb up to 54 milligrams a day of dissolved nicotine through their skin. The report initially said that is equivalent to 32 cigarettes but Plan International revised it to 50.

"Sometimes it feels like you don't have enough breath, you don't have enough oxygen," an unnamed child tobacco worker in Kasungu, in central Malawi, told Plan International's investigators. "You reach a point where you cannot breathe because of the pain in your chest. Then the blood comes when you vomit. At the end ... you remain with a headache."

The symptoms resemble "green tobacco sickness," said MacDonald Mumba, a Plan International official in Malawi. The malady comes from absorbing nicotine from the skin, particularly from wet tobacco.

Mumba said the children had not been subjected to medical tests for the report. Some symptoms among the child labourers may have been caused by exposure to pesticides, highlighting another hazard they face. Children interviewed for the report described sprinkling pesticide onto plants using cups and their bare hands.

The world's giant tobacco companies said they reject use of child labour, but the reality is that Malawians are so poor that many families send their children to work in the fields.

Philip Morris International, one of the largest tobacco companies in the world, said it purchases tobacco from suppliers in Malawi but does not own farms there.

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Anne Edwards, spokeswoman for the company, said it "strongly opposes" child labour and requires tobacco suppliers to promise not to employ anyone younger than 15 or "the applicable minimum employment age or mandatory schooling age, whichever is higher."

British American Tobacco, which buys about 5 per cent of Malawi's annual tobacco crop, said it does not directly employ children and opposes child labour. However, the company said it does not supervise the farms, instead purchasing tobacco through three third-party suppliers.

"We would like to talk to Plan International about their findings and will examine their report with our local suppliers," the company said in a statement.

Mumba said Plan International is not calling for a ban on children in the tobacco industry, explaining that the goal is unrealistic in a country where poverty forces children to work. But it wants employers to provide protective clothing and other gear for the children to reduce exposure to nicotine.

The report also said supervisors on the tobacco farms sometimes hit and otherwise abuse the children

Responding to that finding, Malawian Labor Minister Yunus Mussa told The Associated Press the government is reviewing the country's work laws, which he acknowledged do not provide stiff enough penalties to those who abuse children.

Tobacco is an important cash crop in Malawi, generating 75 per cent of foreign exchange income. More than 80 per cent of Malawians are directly or indirectly employed by the tobacco industry, which contributes up to 30 per cent of the country's Gross Domestic Product.

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Associated Press Writer Anita Powell in Johannesburg contributed to this report.

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