

Africa's Cocoa Industry Still Supported By Child Trafficking

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (AP) — West Africa's cocoa industry is still trafficking children and using forced child labor despite nearly a decade of efforts to eliminate the practices, according to an independent audit published by Tulane University.

A U.S.-sponsored solution called the Harkin-Engel Protocol was signed in 2001 by cocoa industry members to identify and eliminate cocoa grown using forced child labor. A child-labor-free certification process was supposed to cover 50 percent of cocoa growing regions in West Africa by 2005 and 100 percent by the end of 2010. But independent auditors at Tulane University's Payson Center for International Development said in a late September report that efforts have not even come close to these targets.

"Hundreds of thousands of children are involved in work on cocoa farms," the report said. Child trafficking for labor also continues virtually unabated as well, it said.

Thousands of children travel from impoverished neighboring countries to the cocoa plantations in Ivory Coast, where some of them live in substandard conditions and receive little or no pay.

Research in border areas shows that only a tiny proportion of children in cocoa farming ever see a police officer on their way over the border, and that police officers are not properly trained to deal with such crossings. Almost none of the children have any contact with NGOs or anti-child-labor organizations while working.

The Harkin-Engel Protocol set up community-based education and monitoring programs in Ivory Coast and Ghana — the world's two largest cocoa growers — to improve the situation. The International Cocoa Initiative (ICI), an industry funded organization charged with implementing the protocol, said because of the protocol thousands of children are no longer working in exploitative conditions on cocoa plantations in both countries.

But industry efforts are "uneven" and "incomplete," the report said. Less than three percent of cocoa growing villages have been visited by monitors in Ivory Coast and across the border in Ghana, only 13 percent of communities have been impacted by the program.

The Swiss non-governmental group Bern Declaration, which campaigns for fairness in international trade, said Tuesday that the study's findings prove the existence of "the worst forms of child labor on West African cocoa plantations and the fact that efforts to date by the chocolate industry to prevent this have failed."

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

The Ivorian government admits that progress has been slower than anticipated, but points to several key advances.

"Last week, we passed a law prohibiting the worst forms of child labor," said Mokie Sigui, head of the anti child labor taskforce at the Ministry of Labor. "Some infractions carry 20 year prison sentences."

Sigui said the government is building two youth centers in cocoa growing regions where exploited children can be identified and then put back into school.

Manufacturers in the chocolate industry have also set up projects to help keep kids in schools and off the plantations, but the poverty of many families in West Africa makes it impossible for them to pass up the temptation to send their children to work.

"We need to help improve the social and economic situation there so that people can help themselves," said Franz Schmid, spokesman for the Association of Swiss Chocolate Manufacturers, Chocosuisse. He also said that cocoa companies need to know where raw materials come from.

Several international certification bodies are currently working to certify sustainable cocoa farms across the region. Though only four percent of the world's cocoa is now considered sustainable, that figure is projected to rise to over 40 percent by 2020.

The British chocolate bar Galaxy became the first to use 100 percent sustainable cocoa earlier this year, and it should soon be followed by several others. In the Netherlands, the government signed a pledge with chocolatemanufacturers to offer only sustainable chocolate countrywide by 2025.

In the U.S., only Kraft has plans to carry chocolate labeled as certified sustainable, but the world's biggest buyer of cocoa, the American company Mars, has pledged to purchase only sustainable cocoa by 2020.

Swiss chocolate makers such as Nestle and Barry Callebaut — whose chocolate is found in one in four cocoa and chocolate products worldwide — didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

Despite best efforts, the product certification approach is always going to be flawed, said Frank Bremer, director of the German development agency GTZ in Abidjan. GTZ discontinued its projects in cocoa growing communities in Ivory Coast in 2009.

"With 700,000 to 800,000 small family farms in Ivory Coast, trying to guarantee the origin of each individual cocoa bean is virtually impossible," he said.

While millions are spent on labeling and certification, he said, "no one has been working with the victims of this practice — the children."

Another part of the problem is misappropriated funding. The ICI reports having spent \$14.5 million since 2001, but the auditors could find only \$5.5 million spent in

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programming on the ground. The cocoa industry would have to spend 42.5 times more in Ivory coast to abate the problem in 100 percent of cocoa growing communities, it said.

In September, the original sponsors of the protocol, Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) and Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.), pledged an additional \$10 million to the program, urging those involved to redouble efforts.

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Associated Press writer Frank Jordans in Geneva contributed to this report.

Source URL (retrieved on 12/28/2014 - 12:44am):

<http://www.impomag.com/news/2010/10/africas-cocoa-industry-still-supported-child-trafficking>