

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE: 0700 HRS GMT 22 APRIL 1998

Children in South Asia: their rights -- the region's future

KARACHI -- South Asia's children face a litany of human rights abuse at the hands of the state, armed opposition groups; as sex workers, bonded labourers and in brothels, Amnesty International said today as it launched an international campaign on children's rights in the region.

All the governments in South Asia have made a commitment to uphold the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and have strengthened this commitment through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Yet children continue to be ill-treated in the custody of the state as it administers juvenile justice, are left unprotected in the family and community and suffer the consequences of living in the midst of armed conflict.

"The gap between rhetoric and reality must be closed for each and every child in South Asia. A massive 40 percent of the region's population are children -- they are the adults of tomorrow and their childhood must be protected," Amnesty International said.

"As the most vulnerable members of society, children need special protection and regional governments have a duty to provide it. If the forthcoming SAARC 'Decade of the Rights of the Child' is to bring about real change in South Asia, governments must take decisive measures to ensure that state officials, businesses, schools and parents do not deny children their rights."

A High Court investigative committee in **India** found that children picked up by police were subject to "*shockingly savage and barbarous treatment ... [including] electric shocks, piercing chilli-powder and petrol covered sticks into the private parts and knotting the juvenile's body to a stick.*" A boy of 12 was stripped by police and beaten repeatedly with a broken wooden bat in **Sri Lanka** -- he had been picked up on suspicion of links with the armed opposition. In **Bangladesh**, a 12-year-old boy spent 12 years in prison, held in leg irons for almost the entire time. His detention was later found to be illegal.

In **Pakistan**, some bonded labourers are held in private jails controlled by landlords. In one case, children as young as a few months old were held in a rural jail in Sindh, where girls were repeatedly raped by the landlord and his sons. More than 9,000 girls are trafficked each year from **Nepal** and **Bangladesh** -- destined to a life of sexual slavery in **India** and **Pakistan**, often with the acquiescence or sometimes connivance of state officials.

Armed groups in the region have deliberately killed, tortured, raped and intimidated children, and recruited them to fight as soldiers, despite the safeguards in international humanitarian law which forbid these activities. Many children from *Madrasas* (religious schools) in **Pakistan** have been sent to **Afghanistan** to fight for the Taleban. In **Sri Lanka**, six children were among 42 unarmed civilians deliberately killed by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) troops. In **Afghanistan**, in a massacre of 70 civilians, Taleban guards killed and decapitated an eight-year-old boy, and reportedly held down two 12-year-old boys and broke their arms and hands with stones.

All over the South Asia region, children can be seen working in factories, mines, brick kilns and brothels. They often work in dangerous and unhealthy environments and are deprived of rights promised them in the CRC such as health, education and recreation. They find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty, growing up illiterate, unskilled and prone to involvement in crime.

Economic disadvantage, social exclusion and political marginalization add to the vulnerability of youth to perpetuate these cycles of abuse. Girls face particular disadvantage, which compounds the discrimination faced by women.

Amnesty International's campaign report recognizes that delivering on the commitments contained in the CRC is an enormous challenge for any government, requiring a combination of legal, economic and social measures, and that the task is especially daunting for many of the countries of South Asia, with large and diverse populations, limited resources and weak institutions.

According to Amnesty International, some governments have taken positive initiatives to improve children's rights, ranging from legislation to protect children to human rights education programs, with varying degrees of implementation and success.

"But these have not stopped some state officials from denying children their rights, allowing abuses against children in the community and family -- either through active collusion and complicity or through tacit toleration and acquiescence," the report argues.

According to Amnesty International there are several practical measures which governments could take as a first step towards improving the human rights situation of children. These include: amending domestic legislation to bring it in line with international standards; giving clear signals to law enforcement officials that those who violate the rights of children will be punished; and ensuring that funds are available to secure the smooth operation of the judicial process for children.

Amnesty International's report also contains recommendations to armed opposition groups. Specifically, that they should make clear to all those they command that torture and deliberate or indiscriminate killings will not be tolerated and that all civilians should be treated humanely, that they should prohibit the compulsory or voluntary recruitment into their armed forces of anyone under the age of 18, and that they should ban the use of anti-personnel mines.

The human rights organization also says that the international community -- governments, international agencies, businesses and ordinary people can play an important role in protecting children's rights in South Asia by raising human rights concerns with regional governments and supporting defenders of children's rights within the region. Businesses in particular should ensure that their partner companies or subsidiaries do not employ children in dangerous conditions, or contribute to ill-treatment of children.

"South Asia's children represent one quarter of the world's children -- what happens to them is important for children globally," Amnesty International said. "This year is the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR). Children are fully entitled to the rights it contains."

"The best possible commemoration of this milestone in human rights will be to ensure that people in South Asia celebrating the 100th anniversary will be able to look back on a life of full enjoyment of the rights contained in the UDHR."

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