

Outlook

Report blames government of El Salvador and Coca-Cola for child labour abuses

Children suffer in sugar fields

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Kevin Sullivan
in El Chaparral, El Salvador

Jesus Franco, 14, has scars crisscrossing his legs from his ankles to his thighs, and more on his small hands. For more than half of his young life, he has spent long days cutting sugar cane. He has the machete scars to prove it, and so do his four brothers and sisters, aged nine to 19, all of whom work in the sweltering cane fields.

"I don't like doing it, I just go for the money," he said, sitting next to his tiny house in this steamy village, 50km north of San Salvador, the capital. El Chaparral is a place of mud, flies and skinny dogs, surrounded on all sides by the vast fields of spike-leaved sugar cane that are the lifeblood of all 70 families in town.

Jesus's story is repeated countless times across Latin America. More than 17 million children between the ages of five and 14 are working in the region, according to a 2002 report by the International Labour Organisation, the UN agency that is seeking minimum labour rights and world-wide standards.

Child labour perpetuates poverty by drawing the younger generation into the same low-wage manual jobs as their parents, often at the expense of education, according to poverty experts. Because children typically earn less than an adult performing the same work, widespread child labour helps depress wages.

While children work in coffee, onion, tomato and other fields, sugar cane work is considered far more dangerous and rigorous. About 5,000 children under the age of 18 plant or cut sugar cane in El Salvador, many of them wielding long machetes from the time they are as young as five years old, as evidenced by interviews here and also according to a report issued last month by Human Rights Watch.

"The use of child labour is rampant in planting and harvesting sugar cane," said Michael Bochenek, chief author of the report by the New York-based rights group.

Human Rights Watch said that the sugar fields where it found widespread use of child labour were owned both by individual Salva-

dorans or groups of small cooperatives. Sugar cane labourers said they did not know who owned the land where they worked for a daily wage.

Sugar is El Salvador's second most important agricultural product, after coffee. There is a surplus on the world market, the price having dropped from nine cents a pound (20 US cents per kilo) in 2001 to about seven cents a pound (15.5 cents per kilo) after having been even lower.

Sugar cane workers, including children, use machetes to cut the hard, sharp stalks in thickly planted fields where there is little room to manoeuvre. Children and families said that cuts requiring stitches are common in the fields, and many more children suffer burns from caustic fertiliser that they spread by hand.

Human Rights Watch faults the Salvadoran government, the sugar industry and companies that ultimately purchase refined sugar, among them the Coca-Cola, for not doing enough to eliminate child labour in the fields. In places such as El Chaparral, it is evident that families are locked into child labour, with no other means of survival.

"I wish that they could do easier jobs, but we have to have the money," said Teodora Franco Lopez, 47, Jesus's mother. She said her children miss three months of school during the winter harvest season because they are too tired to study after spending six to nine hours in the fields. She said that her children bring in \$150 every month, from November to March, and that is the family's only steady income for the year.

Bochenek said foremen on the country's many small sugar cooperatives, which supply raw cane to mills, turn a blind eye to child labour. He and other investigators interviewed more than 30 children who routinely suffer deep gashes.

Bochenek said El Salvador's sugar industry was chosen for scrutiny because its problems are "representative of the region". Sugar is also an important crop in most countries in Central America and the Caribbean. Bochenek said that the average cane worker's salary in El Salvador is about \$75 a month, but said that "isn't enough to pay even basic food needs".

Parents interviewed in El Chaparral



Not so sweet? But Coca-Cola says it has a strict policy against child labour

ral said that they would continue sending their youngest children to the fields, which helps families reach daily quotas. Children are paid only when they reach 10 years old, parents said. They are paid the equivalent of \$4 for a nine-hour day; younger children often split a single daily wage.

"I like it because I get to be with my father," said Miguel Angel Orellano, 9, who said his father gives him about \$1 a day for helping him cut cane. Miguel Angel is one of eight children in his family who work in the fields. His sister, Rosa Maria, 19, stood nearby; she had thick scars and red and white rashes on her hands and arms. She said she got the rashes from spreading fertiliser the previous week.

Walter Palacios, director of social welfare at the Salvadoran ministry of labour, said the government was working to eradicate the problem. He said that child labour also persists in the fishing, waste, prostitution and fireworks industries.

"It's not just an economic problem; there are cultural factors," he said. "It's very important that there be a joint plan between all parties, to

improve the situation of these children."

"Of course," he said, help from big companies such as Coca-Cola "would improve the situation."

The Human Rights Watch report does not accuse Coca-Cola of breaking laws, but it urges the company to "recognise its responsibility".

Carol M Martel, Coca-Cola's director of public affairs in Atlanta, said in a letter to Human Rights Watch that the company does not condone child labour and has a strict policy against its direct suppliers using child labour. She said there was no evidence that child labour was used in either the Salvadoran refinery the company uses, or the mill that provides sugar to that refinery. She also said the company has no direct contracts with the field cooperatives that supply raw cane to the mill.

Bochenek said Coca-Cola's position was inadequate. "Coca-Cola has a responsibility to look not only at its direct suppliers, but to ensure that human rights aren't abused farther back in the supply chain, particularly when we are talking about a primary ingredient like sugar," he said.