



Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Office of International Labor Affairs

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

Worker Rights in Focus: Forced Labor

Although outlawed in every country, forced labor continues to be found throughout the world. This brutal crime undermines workers' human rights and fundamental freedoms and, in the aggregate, robs them of billions of dollars each year. In general terms, forced labor occurs when an individual is compelled to work under verbal or physical threat and in a situation he or she did not enter voluntarily. It takes many forms, including debt bondage, forced prison labor, domestic servitude, and traditional chattel slavery. Forced labor also occurs when workers take a job voluntarily and later find themselves unable to leave. The International Labor Organization estimates that 12.3 million people fall victim to forced labor worldwide. The growth of trafficking in persons has also made tackling forced labor a tremendous challenge.

The Antithesis of Decent Work

While forced labor is an ancient crime, it has taken on new forms and adapted to continue to thrive in the global economy. Forcing people to work without compensation but often through cunning or brute force remains a worldwide phenomenon. Common problems in this area include:

- Restricting the movement of workers via threats, intimidation, and violence and/ or by withholding travel documents;
- Subjecting prisoners to involuntary labor for the benefit of private individuals or companies;
- Trapping workers in situations of servitude due to debt obligations resulting from exorbitant recruitment and transport fees;
- Restricting the ability of workers to terminate employment; and
- Requiring service obligations or compulsory military enrollment of young people under 18 years of age.

Highlights from the 2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

The Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (HRR) address the extent to which individual countries respected human rights and worker rights. The 2010 HRR highlighted the problem of forced labor in numerous countries, including in the following instances:

- In India, millions of persons were trapped in bonded labor in agriculture and in other industries and sectors;
- In Uzbekistan, credible reporting indicated the use of forced adult labor during the cotton harvest was higher than in the previous year, and the use of forced child labor in the cotton sector remained widespread;
- Forced labor persisted in Mauritania, Niger, and Mali, particularly for those in domestic service and agriculture;
- In many nations of the Middle East, foreign domestic workers faced conditions of involuntary servitude, including non-payment of wages, imposed isolation, and physical and sexual abuse;
- Indigenous and foreign armed groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo abducted and forcibly recruited men, women, and children to work as combatants, as well as porters and sex slaves in mines;
- In China, workers in reeducation through labor facilities toiled under exploitative conditions; and
- The Burmese government forced its citizens to work on roads, in construction, and in support of military operations.

All 2010 Human Rights Reports are available at:
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/index.htm>.

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