

African "slave ship" highlights spread of child slavery

Trevor Johnson
19 April 2001

On March 30, the *MV Etireno* set sail from Benin for Gabon. The manifest of the Nigerian-registered ship said it was carrying 139 passengers. It had room for 200. The ship was turned away from Libreville, Gabon, after the Transport Ministry issued a press statement claiming there were 250 Nigerian children aboard, destined to be used as slave labour. The ship was then turned away from Douala in Cameroon, before finally docking back in Benin. The international outcry that followed the statement by the Gabon Transport Ministry meant Benin cabinet ministers and United Nations officials, as well as police, crowded the dockside in Cotonou when the *MV Etireno* returned.

In the event, only some 23 children and 20 adolescents were found on board, and they are now to be looked after by relief organisations. Questions remain whether more children were on board, as originally indicated, and if so, what has happened to them? One theory is that they did set sail on board the *MV Etireno* and have disembarked somewhere. Another possibility is that the *MV Etireno* has been confused with another ship that was carrying child slaves.

While the voyage of the *MV Etireno* and the possible fate of any other children that may have been on board is unclear, it remains a fact that some 200,000 children are sold into slavery every year in West and Central Africa. Aid workers say parents are often tempted to sell their children for as little as \$15, in the hope that they may find work in richer West African states, usually on cocoa or coffee plantations. Thousands of children between the ages of nine and 12 are thought to work on plantations in Ivory Coast, the world's top cocoa producer.

Although there may be a superficial resemblance to the African slave trade of the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries, the driving forces behind this modern form of slavery are entirely new. The roots of today's slave trade are to be discovered in the way that capitalism has developed in Africa during the last few decades.

The conditions of extreme poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa have attracted transnational corporations (TNCs), which can profit from Africa's rich mineral resources and other primary products by exploiting the plentiful cheap labour needed to produce and process them. The TNCs are able to sell these products in Europe and America for many times more than they cost to produce. They are aided in this enterprise by the corrupt regimes in many African countries, which are often dominated by the military and kept in power thanks to the backing they receive from the West.

The disastrous impact of IMF policies on Sub-Saharan Africa is also a major factor leading to a resurgence of the traffic in child slaves. Many of the countries expend far more in debt repayments than they do on health and education, in spite of all the fanfare about "debt cancellation".

Today's child slaves are mostly exploited in turning out products to be exported and sold in the West. They can be found on farms and plantations, and in factories and sweatshops. It is thought that at least 15,000 children from Mali are employed in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire producing cocoa, which finds its way into almost half of the world's chocolate. Many are imprisoned on farms and beaten if they try to escape. Some are under 11 years old. The fall in the world market price of cocoa and coffee means the giant corporations who make their profits from selling chocolate and coffee all around the world are looking to cut production costs to the bone. They have done nothing to stop the slave trade taking place in Mali,

since they are the main beneficiaries.

Another odious form of slavery is child prostitution, recently highlighted when it was shown that Britain played an important role as a stop-off point. Thousands of young girls from countries such as Nigeria are shipped to the UK before being taken to other European countries, where they are forced to act as prostitutes.

There is also a thin layer of elite Africans who acquire unpaid servants to work in their houses. Countries in the front line of this trade include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Nigeria and Togo. Traders say girls from Benin and Togo are particularly in demand by wealthy families in Lagos, in Nigeria, and in Libreville, in Gabon. Other children are taken from as far away as Banui in the Central Africa Republic. Children from Banui are said to be in high demand in Cameroon. In one instance, in July 1997, the Benin authorities found 400 children aboard a boat anchored in Cotonou harbour, the site of an historic slaving market. Benin police arrested five West Africans preparing to ship them to Gabon. The police said the children, some aged only eight, had been bought from families for the equivalent of about \$30. The arrest of these particular slave traders is the exception, however, not the rule.

To supply the need for child slaves, traffickers pay the fares, including food for the children during their journey, as well as bribes to ensure the collaboration of border guards. They then recoup this money from the profits arising from the child's labour in their destination country. Often, the parents of those being sold are told their children may have the chance to become rich in another country. Once at their final destination, however, the children receive no money at all.

It is estimated that 1,000 Togolese girls are presently being used as slaves in Gabon. According to investigators, more than 30 children are taken across the Benin-Nigeria border every two months. Of these, 95 percent are girls intended for domestic work, and half are under 15 years old.



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