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## **Child Labor and Prostitution Plague Central America**

by LADB Staff

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Several recent reports indicate that laws protecting children in Central America are poorly enforced. The region is not only plagued with high rates of child labor but also child prostitution and trafficking in children. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that, in all of Latin America and the Caribbean, 20 million youngsters aged five to 17 work for a living or to help support their families.

The Nicaraguan daily *El Nuevo Diario* reported that 300,000 Nicaraguan children work "up to 14 hours a day, exposed to the harsh sun and rain and the dangers of being beaten and sexually abused by unscrupulous adults." El Salvador's Economy Ministry recently reported that 222,000 Salvadoran minors between the ages of 10 and 17 work for pay. The report said about 25,000 Salvadoran minors work in dangerous jobs, such as fishing, garbage sifting, coffee picking, and prostitution.

An ILO study said that 250,000 children and adolescents in Central America work as housekeepers, 85% of whom are girls who work long hours, in many cases only for room and board. Tens of thousands of young domestic servants in Central America lack access to education, breaks, time off, and recreation. Many are also subjected to sexual, physical, and psychological abuse, said the study.

### ***Children forced into prostitution***

Miguel Angel Trinidad of the Organizacion Internacional para las Migraciones (OIM) said children are the principal victims of criminal organizations that engage in the trafficking of people between Central America and the US. The OIM recently condemned the forced prostitution of 300 Honduran minors in Guatemala. The sexual exploitation of Honduran minors has also been detected in Canada, Mexico, and the US. In El Salvador, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) recently revealed the existence of a Central American network that specialized in the child sex trade.

A study by End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT) and the international humanitarian organization Casa Alianza found that minors from Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua have been seen working in brothels in San Salvador and in the Salvadoran ports of La Libertad, El Triunfo, and Acajutla.

Kelly Rivera of ECPAT says that most sexually exploited minors in El Salvador are between the ages of 13 and 18. The US State Department reports that Costa Rica is also a destination and transit point for women and minors forced into prostitution. In December 2000, the US television program 20/20 broadcast an expose on child prostitution in Costa Rica that embarrassed the administration of former President Miguel Angel Rodriguez (1998-2002).

### ***NGOs fight sex traffic while governments fail to take action***

Two years ago, Medicos del Mundo, a Spanish NGO, began assisting Salvadoran minors considered at risk of being sexually exploited. Medicos del Mundo has worked to prevent sexual exploitation by providing at-risk youth with medical attention and psychological and legal assistance. Members of the organization regularly visit areas where minors are known to be sexually exploited. Representatives of Medicos del Mundo understand that their resources are limited. They focus their efforts on the most vulnerable youth, while acknowledging that they cannot solve the problem of sexual exploitation of Salvadoran minors. The organization says that its efforts are no substitute for state action and that the state has an obligation to protect its citizens, especially its children.

Some NGOs suggest that the Salvadoran government has not made sufficient efforts to combat child prostitution. ECPAT's Rivera says, "There is no policy of tackling the problem; the governmental institutions say that they don't have resources to confront the problem and they have no specific programs." The State Department has criticized the police forces of El Salvador and Guatemala for not arresting criminals engaged in the trafficking of people. Unlike some other Central American governments, the new Costa Rican administration of President Abel Pacheco appears to be taking the fight against child prostitution seriously.

At Costa Rica's recent annual tourism trade show (Expotur), Pacheco and Tourism Minister Ruben Pacheco stated clearly that those seeking or participating in the sexual exploitation of children were not welcome in the country. "Those wanting to visit [Costa Rica] should come to enjoy our peaceful way of life, our traditions, our culture, and our ecological wealth, but never again to abuse our children," the president said.

Tourism Minister Pacheco has promised to work closely with ECPAT and the child-advocacy foundation Paniamor in the fight against child prostitution. Casa Alianza's regional director Bruce Harris praised Minister Pacheco for publicly recognizing that Costa Rica is a destination for sex tourists. Harris suggested that, regarding addressing sexual exploitation, the new administration was better than the previous one, which left a legacy of "thousands of children in danger."

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