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Businesses exploiting children, says Peet

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Brief Businesses exploiting children, says Peet

By HADASSAH HALL

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Children are still being exploited in the business sector, a senior government minister has claimed.

Minister of Labour and Immigration Vincent Peet said on Tuesday that most employers are standing by the international convention to protect children in The Bahamas.

But he warned that some youngsters are still being used as cheap labour despite the government's acting on a child labour report by the International Labour Organisation in 2002.

Minister Peet, who was the main speaker at a one-day seminar on child labour and hazardous occupations, told The Guardian: "That is fairly current. That is reflective of what is happening now. The trend is one that obviously continues."

According to the minister, the report showed that the worse forms of child labour among locals involved commercial sexual activity.

He added that "sweethearting" between schoolgirls and older men was commonly

reported. There were also reports of schoolgirls under 16, and as young as 12, involved in various forms of commercial sexual activity.

"The study also revealed that young girls worked predominantly in the straw market as assistants in clothing stores and were mainly involved in commercial sexual activities," said Minister Peet.

He expressed that the government is "fully committed" to international standards related to eradicating child labour.

Child labour is the unacceptable form of child work. It is work that exposes children to harm or exploitation.

Of the 52 reports of children and young people involved in the worse forms of child labour with locals, 35 were related to commercial sexual activities.

The seminar was held to increase the awareness of issues surrounding child employment, as well as to identify solutions to eradicate the practice.

Minister Peet said The Bahamas is fully committed to upholding the standards established by the ILO. The Bahamas has been a member of the ILO since 1976 and has 30 ratified conventions in force, one of which is the Worst Forms of Child Labour.

Additionally, research has found that the general economic activities undertaken by boys and girls ages seven to 17 were done during the summer vacation, after school or on the weekends.

These young people mainly worked as dishwashers for restaurants, sometimes until 1 a.m.; horse and carriage operators, supermarket assistants, gas station attendants and car washers.

The study also found that young boys spent long hours at night crawfishing and crabbing. It also found that there were boys who dived off piers in Nassau for money.

The sale of food, newspaper and crafts as well as activities, such as tire repairing, roof repairing and constructing, and employment in family businesses, such as crawfishing, cleaning and selling lunch and cutting and selling sea sponge, were done by children.

In Nassau, the working children lived

Over-the-Hill - in Bain Town, Grants Town, the Wulff Road area, Nassau Village, Solider Road, Wilson Track, Union Village, Pinewood Gardens, Newbold Street, and other areas.

In Freeport, working children were from Eight Mile Rock and Pinders Point, a low- income area outside of Freeport that is populated by Haitian immigrants and their descendants.

The study further revealed that working children experienced varying levels of exploitation, including non-payment, irregular payment, reliance on tips rather than a basic wage, wages lower than the minimum wage, long hours, late hours during the school week, the possibility of sexual abuse and robbery and the lack of adult supervision.

As a result of the Grand Bahama tragedy of the five missing boys, the majority of whom worked at a supermarket, the Ministry of Labour and Immigration held a meeting on November 24, 2003, with supermarket owners and representatives to discuss the concerns of the individuals in relation to child labour, with a view to addressing them.

John Pinder, 1st Vice President of the National Congress of Trade Unions (NCTU), said it is timely to address the issue of child labour.

He recalled visiting a food store on Monday and being disturbed that a 10-year-old was punished for an infraction.

"His punishment was he had to wait for 30 persons to serve before being given another opportunity to go and pack some groceries. In addition to that, it has been brought to my attention that the packing boys do not receive a wage. But they have to restock the shelf of any groceries that are left, make sure trolleys are parked in a certain area, sweep things that are spilled and they are not on the payroll."

Mr Pinder admitted, though, that child labour in The Bahamas is a way of keeping children "out of mischief."

"You would find that we try to get them jobs at the food stores to make sure they are occupied and don't get into mischief. I learned carpentry under my father during the summer months."

He also expressed that from an international labour perspective, child employment is a vexing problem throughout most countries with lower economic standards where children are being abused for profit making.

Labour Project Manager at the International Labour Organisation, Leslie Brown, said child labour is much more intense in other countries in the region, including Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Jamaica and Belize.

"We have seen some instances in The Bahamas and Barbados, but they are not as wide spread as in the other countries. However, due to the fragility of tourism-based economies, our situation can change rapidly and therefore we should look at mechanisms to address this situation that may not be as intense as in other parts of the world," Mr Brown said.

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