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News

Child labour declining worldwide for first time, says ILO

AP
Friday, May 05, 2006

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil (AP) - Taina Moraes cut sisal to make rope in northeastern Brazil, a tough job for a seven year-old girl. But UN-backed programmes helped her family plant crops and buy goats to raise - and in doing so got Taina out of the factory and into the schoolhouse.

"In the beginning I didn't know how to read. But my teacher kept pushing me, and now reading is my life," Taina, now 15, said from Valente, 800 miles (1,300 kilometres) northeast of Rio.

Taina is being touted as a success story by the International Labour Organization, which announced yesterday that the number of children at work around the world is declining for the first time.

The number of child labourers fell by 11 per cent between 2000 and 2004, from 246 million to 218 million, the Geneva-based ILO said.

"The end of child labour is within our reach," the group's director-general, Juan Somavia, said in a report. "We can end its worst forms in a decade."

The most dramatic decline has been in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the number of children at work has fallen by two-thirds in four years, the ILO said. Just five per cent of children in the region are now working.

Brazilian children still cut sugar cane in the northeast, make charcoal in central Brazil, sell candy at streetlights in São Paulo and run drugs in the slums of

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Rio de Janeiro. But the ILO said reduced poverty, better education and a global rejection of child labour have helped shrink their numbers.

The number of working Brazilian children ages 5-9 fell by 61 per cent between 1992 and 2004, and the larger number of working children ages 10-17 fell by 36 per cent.

Globally, the biggest problem is agriculture, where seven out of 10 child labourers work, the ILO said.

Child labour also fallen in Asia and the Pacific, but the region still has some 122 million child workers between the ages of 5 and 14, the most of any region. And the ILO said the number in Asia could rise again because of December 2004 tsunami and the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan.

"Separated from their families, girls and boys became vulnerable to abduction and the more general risk of becoming entangled in child labour as part of the coping mechanism adopted by surviving families and communities," the ILO said.

The biggest challenges lie in sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty, high population growth and an AIDS epidemic have hampered efforts to curb child labour. The region has the highest proportion of working children in the world, with nearly 50 million - one in every four children, the ILO said.

Poor children join the workforce early, and are valued for their agility and manual dexterity, especially in fishing communities where small fingers are useful in handling fine nets.

"It is mostly children from large households who are given out because their parents are very - I mean very - poor and cannot feed them," said Cromwell Awadey, of the religious charity International Needs in Ghana.

But there is hope: Primary school enrollment in the region increased 38 per cent between 1990 and 2000, according to the ILO.

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