
Malaysia: Indonesian children and migrant workers enslaved in oil palm plantations

Oil palm firms are making a fortune in Malaysia particularly with the current agrofuel rush. But none of it goes to those who put their blood and flesh to make the money come out from oil palm plantations (see WRM Bulletin N° 134). Migrant workers from Indonesia appear to be among those who get the worst deal.

At least 103 oil palm plantations in Sabah employ about 200,000 legal migrants as well as 134,000 considered illegal workers from Indonesia. An article from Erwilda Maulia, published in The Jakarta Post on September 17, 2008, reports "slavery practices" at oil palm plantations in Sabah, Malaysia. The National Commission for Child Protection revealed that thousands of Indonesian migrant workers and their children have been "systematically enslaved".

Denunciation came from a group of local Indonesian teachers who reported "an alleged case of child exploitation as well as several cases of physical and sexual harassment of children of Indonesian migrant employees". They also said that "children between the ages of six and 18 had to work for hours collecting sacks of oil palm seeds scattered on the ground, in return for a minimal amount of pay. The children were often forced to work by their own parents or by plantation managers", he added.

Arist Merdeka Sirait, a member of a fact-finding team sent to plantations in Sabah said: "They are placed in isolated barracks with no access to transportation, making it impossible for them to leave the plantations. Nor do they have access to clean water, lighting and other facilities."

The article reported him as saying that about 72,000 children of Indonesian migrant workers at the Sabah plantations were forced to work without regulated employment hours, meaning they were made to work all day long. The children were not provided with birth certificates or any other type of identity documents, effectively denying their right to formal education, among other rights.

"We call this 'bonded labor' (a means of paying off debt by direct labour rather than by currency or goods), and it is a modern kind of slavery," Arist added. According to him, "Bonded labor" was common at all the plantations, and Malaysian authorities deliberately allow such conditions to persist.

It is very convenient for the ambitious corporations to have a way of maintaining "illegal" workers and by enslaving children of migrant workers they secure a future low-paid labour force, just like their parents. To make matters worse, "illegal" workers are often extorted by Malaysian security officers who check their documents, Arist denounced.

The bitter fruit of oil palm plantations seems to become even more sour for the workers.

Article based on information from: "RI workers, children 'enslaved' in Malaysia, commission says", Erwilda Maulia, The Jakarta Post, 09/17/2008, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/09/17/ri-workers-children-039enslaved039-malaysia-commission-says.html>

