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UN human rights expert condemns child 'slavery' in Haiti

Thousands of Haitian unpaid child labourers are trapped in a "modern form of slavery," an independent United Nations human rights expert said today.

According to a press release by the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Gulnara Shahinian, the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, voiced her deep concern over the highly exploitative nature of the 'restavek' system in Haiti, which she said is tantamount to slavery.

At the end of her 2-10 June visit to the impoverished nation, she said the system of unpaid child labour "deprives children of their family environment and violates their most basic rights such as the rights to education, health, and food as well as subjecting them to multiple forms of abuse including economic exploitation, sexual violence and corporal punishment, violating their fundamental right to protection from all forms of violence."

Ms. Shahinian, who carries out her duties in an independent and unpaid capacity, commended the authorities for its efforts to tackle the issue and protect the rights of restavek children.

But she condemned what she said was a new development: professional recruiters "who for financial gain recruit children from rural areas to work in urban families as child slaves in domestic work and outside the home in markets."

Further, demand for child slaves has shifted from wealthy families to poorer ones, resulting in an "alarming" situation for hundreds of thousands of children in Haiti.

The Rapporteur recommended that the Government establish a National Commission on children, paying special attention to the most vulnerable among them and monitoring and protecting children's rights.

Additionally, she said, authorities should take steps to completely eliminate the system through such means as a sensitization campaign on the dangers and impact of the practice of restavek on children and child labour in general, by registering children throughout the country, and by providing alternative income generating programs for poor families in rural communities.

She also recommended compulsory and free primary education for children and training of government officials dealing with vulnerable children.

Ms. Shahinian was appointed to her position by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council in May 2008 and is the first-ever Special Rapporteur in this field.
