

CRUCIFIXION AT EASTER: The Redemptive Death of a 12-Year Old Boy

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Iqbal Masih is dead. He was twelve years old and had worked half his life chained to a carpet loom. He was killed in the dark of night on Easter Sunday by a single shot from a 12-gauge shotgun on the outskirts of an obscure village of mud huts a few miles from Lahore, Pakistan. Iqbal and two cousins were taking supper to a relative working in a nearby field when it happened. A perfunctory one-paragraph police report issued the following day said the boys had surprised a local farmworker named Muhammed Ashraf, "alias Hero," in a compromising act with a donkey, "whereupon Ashraf at once took out 12 bore gun and fired straight at Iqbal Masih."

Iqbal died immediately of massive hemorrhaging from 120 pellet wounds to his back, buttocks and legs. Ashraf, alias Hero, disappeared. Iqbal's cousins and mother, members of Pakistan's impoverished Christian minority, fled for their lives to the protection of the organization Iqbal had served and which two years ago had liberated him, the Bonded Labor Liberation Front of Pakistan (BLLF-P).

But, unlike thousands of Pakistan's other child carpet slaves, Iqbal did not die quietly and unnoticed. For this amazingly courageous child was known around the world. Rescued two years ago from the carpet loom, he had become a powerful and dauntless crusader against bonded servitude in Pakistan's carpet industry, where at least half a million and perhaps many more children toil under inhuman conditions. Honored in Boston by the Reebok Human Rights Foundation last December, Iqbal had also traveled to Europe to testify before the International Labor Organization, and at the time of his death was the president of BLLF's children's section.

It was immediately assumed that he had been assassinated by some agent of what is commonly called the "carpet mafia," the politically powerful and corrupt leaders of one of Pakistan's major export industries. The preliminary police report did nothing to dispel this suspicion, nor did the alacrity with which the Pakistani government paid money to his family, even as it hesitated to conduct a more serious investigation. When they were safely under the protection of the BLLF, Iqbal's cousins who gave an initial statement to the police along the lines of the police report, soon issued a statement saying they had spoken under duress and denying that account.

Iqbal's murder swiftly became the subject of major international protest. The U.S. and other governments served notice to Mrs. Bhutto's government of their concern for a thorough and impartial investigation. Thousands of children marched through the streets

of Lahore, New Delhi and elsewhere. In Australia, a movement was launched to urge carpet retailers to stop selling rugs made in child labor sweatshops. In Germany, non-governmental organizations planned to carry out their own investigation and stepped up their consumer campaign against child-labor produced carpets. In the U.S. the Child Labor Coalition launched a nationwide street campaign by leafletting in 15 major cities in front of stores selling carpets from India, Nepal and Pakistan.

After two weeks, cable traffic from the US Embassy in Islamabad was leaning toward accepting the Pakistani government's bizarre explanation of Iqbal's murder. However, others were not so sure. Forensics expert Robert Kirschner, the renowned Cook County Illinois Medical Examiner who has conducted human rights forensic investigations in many countries, examined the initial police report and autopsy record and found many unanswered questions. In a letter to Reebok's Doug Cahn he wrote, ""The information in the [First Information Report] does not appear to be consistent with injury pattern described in the autopsy protocol. Further investigation is clearly necessary to resolve the discrepancies between the pattern of injuries and the alleged circumstances of the attack."" At latest report, the Department of State was again urging a thorough and impartial investigation.

An objective check into the murky circumstances of Iqbal's death is certainly warranted. At this stage only an internationally credible body such as the International Commission of Jurists or the United Nations Human Rights Committee could conduct such a probe, since the cooperation of the Pakistan government is necessary to gain access to the relevant evidence. Such an investigation should be launched forthwith.

However, the senseless slaughter of Iqbal Masih -- whether it was as claimed by the cruel stupidity of an exposed animal rapist, or as is broadly suspected, by the stupid cruelty of an exposed child slave trader -- gains redemptive meaning for all the children Iqbal died trying to save only if adults take up his cause both in the corridors of power and the showrooms of the home furnishing trade.

On Friday, May 5, the U.S. Department of Labor conducted a hearing about child labor, focussing on agricultural labor and bonded servitude around the world. At that hearing Darlene Adkins of the Child Labor Coalition described the RUGMARK initiative which has just been launched in India, in Europe and the United States to certify hand-made carpets that are made without child labor, insofar as that can be determined by a rigorous process involving both professional inspectors and NGO random inspection of loom sites. She said that the campaign, targeting 15 major market areas in the U.S., had sought the cooperation of the ten largest home furnishing dealers -- companies such as Levitz, Ethan Allen, Ikea and Pier One Imports. She spoke of the importance of consumers asking carpet dealers to stock carpets with the RUGMARK trademark, and noted that none of these major home furnishings retailers had yet made such a commitment.

In Germany, by contrast, the Ministry of Labor has endorsed the RUGMARK campaign, key German mail order rug dealers have pledged to stock *only* RUGMARK rugs, and as

of May 1, some 17,000 Indian carpets with the RUGMARK label have been shipped to Germany.

In Nepal, it was reported at the same hearing, 25 major carpet producers have signed documents pledging to join RUGMARK as soon as it is formally established in that country, probably within the next two months. The largest U.S. importer of Tibetan rugs from Nepal, Tufenkian Tibetan Carpets, has agreed to endorse the campaign. Pakistani exporters, by contrast, have yet to take serious steps to initiate a RUGMARK-like program or to join the RUGMARK Foundation. Their lobbying efforts, as their industry representatives have made their rounds in Washington, have been concentrated on denial of the problem and charges against the credibility of the child labor abolitionists in Pakistan.

However, perhaps the most distressing testimony at the hearing was that of Daniel Hodges, president of the Oriental Rug Importers Association, which is made up of 100 of the largest rug importing firms in the U.S. In the face of the awful exposures of child servitude in the carpet industry brought to the fore by the death of Iqbal Masih, Hodges, who has relentlessly attempted for two years to undermine the RUGMARK initiative, insisted that RUGMARK is "a sham." RUGMARK, he asserted, could not succeed because it was based on inspections of loom sites by "untrained NGOs" and was not conducted under the control of the Indian Government (a notoriously inefficient battler against child labor. Indian law has forbidden child labor in the making of carpets since 1933, to no discernible effect) While recognizing that child servitude is a major element in the production of the carpets his industry sells, he had no suggestions for ending the abuse and only criticism for those who try.

This commerce-at-any-cost attitude can only be amended by strong consumer pressure. Dealers should be asked to insist that child-labor free carpets be stocked, and that their partners in India, Pakistan and Nepal take the steps necessary to get a license from the Rugmark Foundation to use the trademark. As the RUGMARK campaign progresses and more rugs are available, dealers should be asked to stock *only* those rugs which are certified by the RUGMARK label to be as child-labor free as can be humanly guaranteed.

It is not accidental that Iqbal Masih was a Christian, although there is no evidence of any religious element in his killing. The Christians of Pakistan are among the poorest, most oppressed people in this officially Muslim land, and their poverty and social weakness has meant that disproportionate numbers of the bonded laborers in Pakistan come from their ranks. One can only try to imagine the anguish of a family that was forced by circumstance to place their four year old son in a carpet factory, bonded by a loan of a paltry \$16. But that is what happened to Iqbal. For six years he labored shackled to the carpet loom by day, free from his bonds only at night to sleep, for nominal payment of one rupee (\$0.03) per day. When in 1992 he was liberated by the BLLF-P, he had supposedly accumulated a debt to his master of 13,000 Rp. (\$419)

Millions of other Pakistani children toil under similar conditions. Estimates vary from 5 million to 20 million, and the Pakistan government admits it has no real statistics. They

haul bricks at kilns, work as bonded labor on farms, make surgical instruments and stitch soccer balls, clean the houses of the rich and serve the sexual appetites of the powerful. Their plight is pitiful and their numbers, by all accounts, are on the increase.

A campaign to label carpets produced without child labor can, if successful, press the Pakistani government to take steps to end these awful abuses. But by itself, it will not succeed in preventing children from falling into other equal or greater dangers. To do that, a broad-based approach is necessary. If the RUGMARK campaign, building on the awareness Iqbal's death generated, also leads to stronger programs to provide alternatives for south Asia's child carpet slaves, alternatives such as basic education, agrarian reform, enforcement of laws banning child and bonded labor, rehabilitation for its victims and adequate development assistance from U.S. and international agencies, then Iqbal will have not died in vain.