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Modern Slavery

Human bondage in Africa, Asia, and the Dominican Republic

by **Ricco Villanueva Siasoco**

This article was posted on **April 18, 2001**.

When a ship carrying hundreds of people was recently turned away from [Benin](#), Africa, officials suspected that the children on board were human slaves. The incident once again brought attention to the problem of [slavery](#). At this moment, millions of men, women, and children—roughly twice the population of Rhode Island—are being held against their will as modern-day slaves.

Sometimes referred to as bonded laborers (because of the debts owed their masters), public perception of modern slavery is often confused with reports of workers in [low-wage jobs](#) or inhumane working conditions. However, modern-day slaves differ from these workers because they are actually held in physical bondage (they are shackled, held at gunpoint, etc.).



Sudanese slaves await redemption in Madhol, Sudan, in December 1997. An Arab trader sold 132 former slaves, women and children, for \$13,200 (in Sudanese money) to a member of Christian Solidarity International. (AP Photo)

Modern-day slaves can be found laboring as servants or concubines in [Sudan](#), as child "carpet slaves" in [India](#), or as cane-cutters in [Haiti](#) and southern [Pakistan](#), to name but a few instances. According to [Anti-Slavery International](#), the world's oldest human rights organization, there are currently **over 20 million people** in bondage.

Where does this slavery take place? Who are the faces behind these atrocities?



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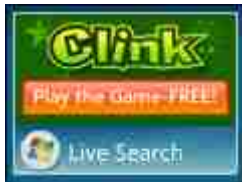
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Slave Trading on Africa's West Coast

The slave trade in Africa was officially banned in the early 1880s, but forced labor continues to be practiced in West and Central Africa today. UNICEF estimates that 200,000 children from this region are sold into slavery each year. Many of these children are from [Benin](#) and [Togo](#), and are sold into the domestic, agricultural, and sex industries of wealthier, neighboring countries such as [Nigeria](#) and [Gabon](#).

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The most recent incident involved the *MV Etireno*, which was refused from ports in Gabon and Cameroon. When the ship reached Cotonou, Benin, in April, 2001, police began an investigation of the captain and crew. More adults than children were believed to be aboard.

Chattel slavery in Sudan

The enslavement of **the Dinkas in southern Sudan** may be the most horrific and well-known example of contemporary slavery. According to 1993 U.S. State Department estimates, up to 90,000 blacks are owned by North African Arabs, and often sold as property in a thriving slave trade for as little as \$15 per human being.

Animist tribes in southern Sudan are frequently invaded by [Arab](#) militias from the North, who kill the men and enslave the women and children. The Arabs consider it a traditional right to enslave southerners, and to own [chattel](#) slaves (slaves owned as personal property).

"There he found several Dinka men hobbling, their Achilles tendons cut because they refused to become Muslims."

Physical mutilation is practiced upon these slaves **not only to prevent escape, but to enforce the owners' ideologies**. According to an ASI report: "Kon, a thirteen-year-old Dinka boy, was abducted

—from an ASI report on Sudanese slavery

by Arab nomads and taken to a merchant's house. There he found several Dinka men hobbling, their Achilles tendons cut because they refused to become Muslims. Threatened with the same

treatment the boy converted."

In a detailed article by Charles Jacobs for the [American Anti-Slavery Group](#) (ASI), Jacobs recounts how a 10-year-old child was taken in a raid on her village in southern Sudan, and branded by her master with a hot iron pot.

Child "carpet slaves" in India

Kidnapped from their villages when they are as young as five years old, **between 200,000 and 300,000 children** are held captive in locked rooms and forced to weave on looms for food. In India—as well in other countries—the issue of slavery is exacerbated by a rigid caste system.

The **International Labor Rights and Education Fund** is one organization that has rescued many of these child slaves. The group recalls this scene: "Children work in damp pits near the loom. Potable water is often unavailable and food consists of a few chapatis [bread balls], onions and salt...The children often are made to sleep on the ground next to their looms, or in nearby sheds. After working from ten to fourteen hours, they are expected to clean out their sheds and set up work for the next day."



Many of our images of human slavery, like the one above, date from the American Civil War. However, there are an estimated 200 million people in bondage today.

Shackled laborers in Pakistan

Many of the bonded laborers are shackled in **leg-irons** in Pakistan. Though much of the debt these cane-harvesters have incurred is real, the practice of exchanging human labor for landowners' loans is illegal.

In a 1992 law passed by the Pakistani government, landlords are barred from offering loans in exchange for work or to hold workers hostage to their debts. The **Human Rights Commission of Pakistan** has freed approximately 7,500 bonded laborers since 1995.

By the commission's estimates, there are still roughly 50,000 bonded laborers in southern Singh. Many of those freed now



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reside in the city of [Hyderabad](#) in makeshift camps. Most are afraid to return to their homeland, however, for fear they will be recaptured and enslaved again.

Cane-cutters in the Dominican Republic

In the Dominican Republic, the collection of slaves for the busy harvest season is more random. The **Dominican army**, with the support of the **State Sugar Council** (known as the CEA), "hauls Haitians off public buses, arrests them in their homes or at their jobs, and delivers them to the cane fields," according to Charles Jacobs.

Some of the cane-cutters sign on to work voluntarily. When the number of workers does not meet the harvest's demand, the Dominican army is set into action. The army's captives are forced to work at gunpoint and beaten if they try to escape.

Beyond the Emancipation Proclamation

Accounts of human beings as modern slaves extend beyond those described here, and include young **girls sold into prostitution in Thailand** and **slave chattels in Mauritania**. Though most Americans believe slavery was abolished with the [Emancipation Proclamation](#) more than a century ago, the horrors of human beings held in bondage flourishes today.

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