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The Bondage of Poverty That Produces Chocolate

By NORIMITSU ONISHI

L OGBOGBA, Ivory Coast — One week after leaving his village in neighboring Mali for the first time, Yacouba Diarra, then 14, fell into the hands of a trafficker of children and was smuggled across the border into Ivory Coast's cocoa-producing heartland.

He was with another boy of the same age, both drawn by the promise of \$135 each for a year's labor. "I did not know what kind of work I would do," Yacouba said. "I did not even know we were coming to Ivory Coast."

Once here, Yacouba was taken to a village of mud houses, miles from the nearest paved road, where he worked every day on a cocoa plantation, hacking brush with a machete and slicing ripe cocoa pods from trees. But after a year in the village, Petit Tiémé, the owner paid him only \$13 — or about 4 cents a day, he recalled.

He walked away from his employer at Petit Tiémé in late spring, he said, and settled nearby, here in Logbogba, where he had chanced upon a friend from the same village back home. His only concern was to get paid his back wages.

Yacouba's story is like that of many boys and girls in West and Central Africa, who leave their homes to work in foreign places, sometimes separated from their families for years.

Some children fall into the hands of rings of smugglers and end up exploited. Others are reputed to end up in outright slavery. But most often parents send their children away to earn money or learn a trade, in keeping with an age-old tradition.

Child labor does retain deep roots but it is hard to measure, and the line between slave trading and the bondage of poverty is sometimes unclear.

A recent weeklong journey through this country's remotest cocoa plantations, reachable only by driving on flooded and crater-filled dirt roads and hiking for miles through dense forests, revealed only a handful of children brought here this way — not hundreds. Almost all hired hands were adults from Mali and Burkina Faso.

Only a visit to the hundreds of cocoa plantations in Ivory Coast would be comprehensive. But the discovery of just a few foreign children during visits to dozens of plantations suggests that children who are smuggled by a stranger for profit do not make up a significant share of the cocoa work force here.

But reports of widespread abuse in Ivory Coast, the world's top cocoa exporter, have generated accusations and anger, all the way to Europe and the United States.

In Britain, groups have tried to organize a consumer boycott of chocolate. And in Washington, the House passed a bill that proposed a voluntary labeling system identifying the origin of the

cocoa in chocolate. The label would read "No child slave labor."

The use of children forced to work this way was more common just a few years ago, according to interviews with workers, plantation owners, cocoa industry officials and traffickers themselves.

Since 1998, they say, a drop in cocoa prices and political instability here have made it extremely difficult for foreigners to live in Ivory Coast. The government also pointed to the effects of a bilateral agreement, signed last September, that allows Ivory Coast to repatriate Malian children found working here.

According to a 1998 report by Unicef's Ivory Coast office, children from Mali and Burkina Faso were systematically brought by traffickers to work here; the report contained no estimates of the number involved, effectively acknowledging that it was impossible to determine.

Unicef's office in Mali later estimated the number of foreign children working in Ivory Coast at 15,000. The figure, which was not based on research in Ivory Coast but only in Mali, has been widely cited by private organizations that deal with children and by the Western news media.

Ivory Coast acknowledges the traffic in children, but has angrily denied that it is widespread. "There are isolated cases of trafficked children whom we are trying to protect by arresting the traffickers," Henriette Lagou, the minister of family, women and children, said in an interview in her office in Abidjan.

Much of the confusion stems from the working conditions here. Backbreaking work for 50 cents a day is part of everyday life in much of Africa. Indeed, that wage puts plantation workers at a very low rung, but hardly at the bottom rung, of the ladder in Africa.

According to Unicef, 200,000 children are the victims of traffickers every year and are forced to work in brutal conditions. But experts concede that the figures are only broad estimates.

Just as economic factors push Mexicans into the United States, workers from Mali and Burkina Faso, two landlocked, semi-desert nations, have flocked to Ivory Coast. That this phenomenon includes children is a reflection of this region's enduring poverty, Ms. Lagou said. "People who don't live here can't understand our realities," she said. "You take a couple in Europe or in the United States. They have one or two children, and they can't understand why people traffic in children. But when you live here, you understand right away."

A father in Burkina Faso may have 40 children, she said. "Some of his children don't even know him. It's not the same situation over here."

Under Ivory Coast law, minors over age 14 are allowed to work, as long as the work is not dangerous and they have parental consent. Children brought by traffickers are not allowed to work at all, but the temptation is often too great because they are routinely paid about \$165 a year for plantation work in Ivory Coast. The poorest of Malians, back home, could not make that sum in five years.

In Katiénou, a village north of here, Ibrahim Konaté, an 18-year-old Malian, was in the middle of his second working term in Ivory Coast. During his first, two years ago, Mr. Konaté stayed for 20 months and earned about \$350 — a huge sum to him.

"It was enough to support my family for a year in Mali," said Mr. Konaté, the oldest son in a

family of 10 children. "The money is so good here. That's why I came back."

But the working and pay conditions have put the government and the Western chocolate industry on the defensive, and led to the proposed voluntary labeling system, as sponsored by a New York congressman, Eliot L. Engel, a Democrat who represents the Bronx. In practice, such labeling would be meaningless, because unless one ventured into the plantations, in thick forests several hours by truck and foot, it would be impossible to know who was employing children supplied by traffickers.

Most plantations are small family-owned businesses. Buyers from towns and villages nearby send agents in trucks to buy the cocoa from farmers. These buyers, in turn, sell the cocoa to exporters in Abidjan. The exporters tend to be rich Africans, French or Lebanese. They send the product to the West, where companies like Nestlé and Hershey make it into chocolate.

In Sédoudougou, a village near the cocoa center, Drissa Diarrassouba, a 57-year-old Ivory Coast resident, lives in a compound with stark, one-room houses, without electricity or running water.

He has been a cocoa farmer for 33 years, and in that time his 48 acres have yielded enough for him to buy a tractor and send 8 of his 20 children to school for a few years.

Ivory Coast has many cocoa farmers like Mr. Diarrassouba, rich by the standards of the Malians who work for him, poor by the standards of Ivory Coast city dwellers. A few years ago when the cocoa harvest and prices were strong, he said, he hired seven or eight workers from Mali.

Today, there are only two: Madou and Siaka Traoré, who are brothers, 18 and 14. "If things were going well, I would just be supervising my workers," Mr. Diarrassouba said.

Siaka and his older brother are the oldest of nine children. Their parents are subsistence farmers, too poor to afford an ox.

"We've come to earn money," Siaka said, adding that there was simply none to earn in Mali.

Siaka said he did not know that cocoa was turned into chocolate. He had eaten chocolate once or twice in Mali. The planter, Mr. Diarrassouba, said he had never tasted it; he could have afforded it, of course, but chocolate is not part of the African diet.

Mr. Diarrassouba said acquaintances led him to Siaka and his brother, who were entrusted to him by their parents for a year. "We never discussed salary with the parents," Mr. Diarrassouba said. "What we pay them in the end will depend on the price of the cocoa."

Sitting later on the concrete floor of a tiny dark room at his compound, his swollen belly glistening with sweat, his right eye blinded from a childhood accident, Mr. Diarrassouba said he preferred hiring younger workers.

"It's easier to tell young workers what to do," he said, citing a commonly expressed reason. "The older ones are harder to control. If they are big, they can even lack respect."

Unlike Mr. Diarrassouba, many farmers turn to brokers for their workers. In the town of Sinfra, Niamantou Diakité, a 48-year-old Malian, is one of the best-known brokers. On a recent night, after a dinner of grilled chicken and carp, he relaxed somewhat to explain what he

did.

Truckers from Mali brought him workers, whom he then dispatched to local plantation owners. Most of the workers he dealt with were adults, Mr. Diakité said, but sometimes they were as young as 14 or 15. He said there was nothing wrong in his work — in fact, he said, he provided a service by keeping these workers from unscrupulous brokers.

With him as a broker, the workers would be paid about \$160 a year by the farmer — minus the worker's transportation fee from Mali, about \$30, and Mr. Diakité's own fee, which after much hemming and hawing he said varied between \$10 and \$14.

"With the dishonest brokers it's chaos," he said. "The workers might have to work one year, or even two years, to repay their debts." The piling on of "debts" is one of the most common abuses of the child laborers.

Mr. Diakité said, with evident pride, that he was an honest broker. Indeed, he was respected enough in the town's Malian community to have been elected the local Malian association's secretary general.

But like others in the country's cocoa towns and on the plantations, Mr. Diakité said that his business had been down in the last two years. The cocoa harvest has been weak. What is more, thousands of people from Mali and Burkina Faso have become the targets of xenophobia inside an increasingly unstable Ivory Coast. Many have left the country.

The worldwide prices of cocoa have also reached historic lows, forcing farmers to rely more and more on family members. That appears to be the reason the man who hired Yacouba Diarra paid him only \$13.

According to Yacouba's account, he and another 14-year-old from the same village went looking for work in Sikasso, a city in Mali near the border with Ivory Coast. His friend took them to a distant relative, named Madou, who introduced Yacouba to the man for whom he would work for the next year, a Malian named Moussa Sangaré. Madou asked \$160 for each of the boys, Yacouba recalled. After some haggling, a deal was made for about \$135.

The two boys and Mr. Sangaré eventually arrived on the man's cocoa plantation. After a month's work, Yacouba's friend fell ill and was sent back to Mali. Yacouba stayed for the full year, living with the family.

But after a year, Mr. Sangaré refused to pay Yacouba. Yacouba was owed \$135 — minus the initial transportation fee from Mali, an identity card that Mr. Sangaré had had made for him and incidentals. He reckoned about \$100 was left.

Mr. Sangaré gave him \$13, Yacouba recalled, and told him to leave. Yacouba wanted the remaining \$87.

The plantation, in Petit Tiémé, is a few hours away on a bad road. It is a typical African village, where everyone knows everybody else's business. Several young men in the village said they knew about the case of Yacouba Diarra, and, without prodding, confirmed that he had been paid only \$13 for a year's work.

At the edge of the village, Mr. Sangaré, a man in his 40's, was sitting on a wooden bench in the middle of his courtyard. His family lived in three small mud-brick buildings. It was Friday, a day of rest for him and the rest of the villagers.

"Yacouba Diarra?" Mr. Sangaré said, the smile with which he had greeted a stranger vanishing at the mention of the name.

Mr. Sangaré denied that he had hired Yacouba through a broker in Sikasso. "I met his mother on the road and she agreed to have him work for me," he said, looking down at the ground. His hands shook.

Asked why he had not paid the boy, he said he had gone to Mali a month before to give the money to the boy's mother.

"The money has been given to the mother of Yacouba Diarra," he said. "I gave her the money myself."

Asked to identify the mother's name and village, Mr. Sangaré kept silent for perhaps a full minute, his eyes fixed at his feet.

"I don't remember," he said finally.