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Let Them Sweat

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

TTOCK, Pakistan — When the G-8 leaders meet this week, cowering in a Canadian mountain resort beyond the reach of organized anarchists, here's a way for them to bolster terror-infested third world countries like Pakistan. They should start an international campaign to promote imports from sweatshops, perhaps with bold labels depicting an unrecognizable flag and the words "Proudly Made in a Third World Sweatshop!"

The Gentle Reader will think I've been smoking Pakistani opium. But the fact is that sweatshops are the only hope of kids like Ahmed Zia, a 14-year-old boy here in Attock, a gritty center for carpet weaving.

Ahmed, who dropped out of school in the second grade, earns \$2 a day hunched over the loom, laboring over a rug that will adorn some American's living room. It is a pittance, but the American campaign against sweatshops could make his life much more wretched by inadvertently encouraging mechanization that could cost him his job.

"Carpet-making is much better than farm work," Ahmed said, mulling alternatives if he loses his job as hundreds of others have over the last year. "This makes much more money and is more comfortable."

Indeed, talk to third world factory workers and the whole idea of "sweatshops" seems a misnomer. It is farmers and brick-makers who really sweat under the broiling sun, while sweatshop workers merely glow.

The third world is already battered by heartless conservatives in the West who peddle arms and cigarettes or who (like the Bushies) block \$34 million desperately needed for maternal and infant health by the United Nations Population Fund. So it's catastrophic for muddle-minded liberals to join in and cudgel impoverished workers for whom a sweatshop job is the first step on life's escalator.

By this point, I've offended every possible reader. But before you spurn a shirt made by someone like 8-year-old Kamis Saboor, an Afghan refugee whose father is dead and who is the sole breadwinner in the family, answer this question: How does shunning sweatshop products help Kamis? All the alternatives for him are worse.

"I dream of a job in a factory," said Noroz Khan, who lives on a garbage dump and spends his days searching for metal that he can sell to recyclers. He earns about \$1.40 a day, and children earn just 30 cents a day for scrounging barefoot in the filth — a few feet away from us, birds were pecking at the bloated carcass of a cow, its feet in the air.

Of course, Western anti-sweatshop activists mean well and aim only for improved conditions and a "living wage." But the reality is that the bad publicity becomes one more headache for companies considering operating in international hellholes (where the only lure is wages so low that it would be embarrassing if journalists started asking questions about them), and so manufacturers opt to mechanize their operations and operate in somewhat more developed countries.

For example, Nike has 35 contract factories in Taiwan, 49 in South Korea, only 3 in Pakistan and none at all in Afghanistan — if it did, critics would immediately fulminate about low wages, glue vapors, the mistreatment of women.

But the losers are the Afghans, and especially Afghan women. The country is full of starving widows who can find no jobs. If Nike hired them at 10 cents an hour to fill all-female sweatshops, they and their country would be hugely better off.

Nike used to have two contract factories in impoverished Cambodia, among the neediest countries in the world.

Then there was an outcry after BBC reported that three girls in one factory were under 15 years old. So Nike fled controversy by ceasing production in Cambodia.

The result was that some of the 2,000 Cambodians (90 percent of them young women) who worked in those factories faced layoffs. Some who lost their jobs probably were ensnared in Cambodia's huge sex slave industry — which leaves many girls dead of AIDS by the end of their teenage years.

The G-8 leaders will never dare, of course, begin a pro-sweatshop campaign. But at a summit that will discuss how to bring stability and economic growth to some of the world's poorest nations, it would be a start if Westerners who denounce sweatshops would think less of feel-good measures for themselves and more about how any of this helps people like Ahmed and Kamis.

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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Inviting All Democrats

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF
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HNOM PENH, Cambodia — I'd like to invite Richard Gephardt and the other Democratic candidates to come here to Cambodia and discuss trade policy with scavengers like Nhep Chanda, who spends her days rooting through filth in the city dump.

One of the most unfortunate trends in the Democratic presidential race has been the way nearly all of the candidates, including Howard Dean, the front-runner, have been flirting with anti-trade positions by putting the emphasis on labor, environmental and human rights standards in international agreements.

While Mr. Gephardt calls for an international minimum wage, Mr. Dean was quoted in USA Today in October as saying, "I believe that trade also requires human rights and labor standards and environmental standards that are concurrent around the world."

Perhaps the candidates are simply pandering to unions, or bashing President Bush. But my guess is that they sincerely believe that such trade policies would help poor people abroad — and that's why they should all traipse through a Cambodian garbage dump to see how economically naïve these schemes would be.

Nhep Chanda is a 17-year-old girl who is one of hundreds of Cambodians who toil all day, every day, picking through the dump for plastic bags, metal cans and bits of food. The stench clogs the nostrils, and parts of the dump are burning, producing acrid smoke that blinds the eyes.

The scavengers are chased by swarms of flies and biting insects, their hands are caked with filth, and those who are barefoot cut their feet on glass. Some are small children.

Nhep Chanda averages 75 cents a day for her efforts. For her, the idea of being exploited in a garment factory — working only six days a week, inside instead of in the broiling sun, for up to \$2 a day — is a dream.

"I'd like to work in a factory, but I don't have any ID card, and you need one to show that you're old enough," she said wistfully. (Since the candidates are unlikely to find the time to travel to the third world anytime soon, I put an audio slide show of the Cambodian realities on the Web for them at www.nytimes.com/kristof.)

All the complaints about third world sweatshops are true and then some: factories sometimes dump effluent into rivers or otherwise ravage the environment. But they have raised the standard of living in Singapore, South Korea and southern China, and they offer a leg up for people in countries like Cambodia.

"I want to work in a factory, but I'm in poor health and always feel dizzy," said Lay Eng, a 23-year-old woman. And no wonder: she has been picking through the filth, seven days a week, for six years. She has never been to a doctor.

Here in Cambodia factory jobs are in such demand that workers usually have to bribe a factory insider with a month's salary just to get hired.

Along the Bassac River, construction workers told me they wanted factory jobs because the work would be so much safer than clambering up scaffolding without safety harnesses. Some also said sweatshop jobs would be preferable because they would mean a lot less sweat. (Westerners call

them "sweatshops," but they offer one of the few third world jobs that doesn't involve constant sweat.)

In Asia, moreover, the factories tend to hire mostly girls and young women with few other job opportunities. The result has been to begin to give girls and women some status and power, some hint of social equality, some alternative to the sex industry.

Cambodia has a fair trade system and promotes itself as an enlightened garment producer. That's great. But if the U.S. tries to ban products from countries that don't meet international standards, jobs will be shifted from the most wretched areas to better-off nations like Malaysia or Mexico. Already there are very few factories in Africa or the poor countries of Asia, and if we raise the bar higher, there will be even fewer.

The Democratic Party has been pro-trade since Franklin Roosevelt, and President Bill Clinton in particular tugged the party to embrace the realities of trade. Now the party may be retreating toward protectionism under the guise of labor standards.

That would hurt American consumers. But it would be particularly devastating for laborers in the poorest parts of the world. For the fundamental problem in the poor countries of Africa and Asia is not that sweatshops exploit too many workers; it's that they don't exploit enough.