

## OF HUMAN BONDAGE

*By Kevin Bales, published March 16, 2007*

Slavery came to church for Sandy Shepherd. The teacher and housewife was thrilled when a Zambian boys' choir visited her Baptist church in Colleyville, Texas, a prosperous city near Fort Worth. Singing a cappella and dressed in colourful African prints, the boys wove beautiful harmonies through their religious music. Shepherd, however, was troubled by their young, drawn faces. "They sang like angels, but somehow looked so tired," she says.

The singers were slaves. All 12 had - at ages 11 to 17 - left the Zambian shantytown of Kalingalinga with an American named Keith Grimes for the promise of an American education and a living wage. The reality was a meagre diet, an exhausting schedule and nights spent crammed into a trailer. Each time the boys sang, their "sponsor" collected notes and coins from the appreciative congregation, and kept the money for himself.

After nearly two years of exploitation, three of the older singers began to fight back against Grimes, who ran a Texas-based education charity as a scam, the proceeds going into his own pocket. Grimes called the police, intending to have the boys deported, but since most of them were foreign nationals and minors, the police brought in the immigration service. US Immigration agents investigated and all the boys were taken into care. Grimes was charged but died before going to trial.

As the small Texas community absorbed the news, Shepherd was asked to take in several of the freed slaves. She and her husband eventually adopted the youngest of the choirboys, orphan Given Kachepea. "I thought I was coming to sing in a choir to raise money for schools in Zambia," he says. "Instead, I became a modern-day slave." Given had come to the US hoping to help his home community and get a good education. Instead, he says, "I felt humiliated - like a puppet on a string being moved around. They said if we called the police, we would be deported. They confiscated our passports and we were not allowed to make any phone calls. We were watched constantly." Given has spoken out about his ordeal and now

campaigns against human trafficking. "I've learnt this about modern slavery," he says, "it can be hidden in plain sight."

In this 200th anniversary year of the abolition of the slave trade in the British empire, slavery is turning up in surprising places. The trade may have been outlawed, but the practice still reaches into our homes and businesses, perhaps more than we realise. Most of us learn about modern slavery from the bottom up, in the heart-wrenching stories of individuals enslaved in the developing world or trafficked into forced labour in the west. But there is a larger, historic, top-down account that is only now becoming clear as activists and scholars explore the role of slavery in the global economy. With the end of the cold war, human trafficking and slavery have bounced back as businesses.

The United Nations reports that human trafficking is now the third largest moneymaker for criminals, after drugs and weapons. No one is sure how many people were enslaved 50 years ago, but the number is thought to have grown rapidly with the population explosion to an estimated 27 million today. The increase in slavery is also linked to globalisation. But this is not about sweatshop workers existing on miserly wages. Slaves are under the complete, violent control of another person; they are economically exploited, and get only enough food and shelter to keep them alive. For millions of victims, their experience differs little in hardship from that of slaves hundreds of years ago.

The only thing truly new about slavery today is the dramatic fall in slave prices. Slaves have been expensive, capital purchases for all of recorded history. Over the past 3,500 years the price of slaves has averaged - as supply ebbed and flowed - between £10,000 and £40,000 in today's currency. But since about 1950, a glut of potential slaves has entered the market and the average price for a human life has collapsed to a historic low of less than £100. The supply of possible slaves is especially plentiful among the billion people who live on about a dollar a day, a population concentrated in the developing world. And in countries where high levels of official

corruption mean that criminals can act with impunity, slaves are easily harvested.

With the growth of global markets, some of these slaves are used to produce many of our basic commodities. In Brazil, for example, slaves cut down forests and burn the wood into charcoal to be used to make steel. The European Union imports nearly a million tonnes of Brazilian steel each year to produce everything from cars to buildings to toys. Slavery is in fruit bowls and fridges too. There are documented cases of slaves being used to harvest or produce coffee, sugar, beef, tomatoes, lettuce, apples and other fruit. The list goes on: shrimp and other fish products are suspect, as are cocoa, steel, gold, tin, diamonds, jewellery and bangles, tantalum (used in mobile phones and laptops), shoes, sporting goods, clothing, fireworks, rice, bricks. In the US, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a human-rights group, has freed dozens of workers such as Mexican national "Miguel", who picked fruit under guard. He had come to the US in the hope of earning more money to support his family and buy medicines for his six-year-old son who had cancer. "But when I came here I earned nothing," he said. "It was a false dream. I was a slave."

While a large number of goods are tainted by slavery, only a very small proportion of any particular commodity actually has slave input. If American pre-civil war cotton was primarily a slave-made good, the proportion of today's global cotton harvest touched by slaves may be 1 or 2 per cent at most. A recent International Labour Organization estimate put the profits of human trafficking and forced labour in the range of \$31.6bn. Sizeable, but only a drop in the global economic ocean.

This poses a challenge to businesses and consumers. Cocoa, for example, is grown on more than 600,000 small farms in Ivory Coast, which produces about half the world's supply. Young men, normally from poor neighbouring countries such as Mali, arrive looking for work. In remote rural areas some are tricked and enslaved into farm work. Nineteen-year-old Drissa was one such young man. When he was freed in 2000, he had just gone through a "breaking-in" period as his master accustomed him to enslavement. His back was laced with scars and wounds from being whipped.

But in the cocoa supply chain, European and North American companies are not allowed to buy directly from the farmers; instead the supply filters through a series of Ivorian middlemen and shippers before reaching the coast for export. The profits from slave labour are taken at the farm gate. Western boycotts of certain products

can make things worse by hurting the majority of farmers who don't use slaves, even pushing the families of honest farmers into the destitution that makes them vulnerable to enslavement.

In south Asia, hereditary "debt bondage slavery" is common. Loans are made to families in a financial crisis - for example, crop failure - and since they have no assets, all the work they do must serve as collateral until the loan is repaid. The debt is passed from one generation to the next; up to 10 million people are thought to be held in hereditary debt bondage slavery in India, Pakistan and Nepal.

Although the 200th abolition anniversary is generating much-needed attention for the issue, in some ways a more important, but less remarked date is this year's 220th anniversary of the beginning of the campaign that led to the end of the slave trade.

On May 22 1787, 12 men met above a printing shop in George Yard in the City of London. They were mainly Quakers, but also included Thomas Clarkson who had just graduated from Cambridge (where he won a Latin essay contest writing on the immorality of the slave trade). Together, they planned to bring down a legal industry equivalent in global reach and capital to the car industry of today. Aligned against them were the most powerful men in the empire. The Church of England owned one of the largest slave-using plantations in Barbados, princes invested heavily and the Lord Mayor of London, William Beckford, had built his fortune on slaves. That the abolitionists succeeded in a mere 20 years is almost beyond comprehension, more so when we remember that their victory cost the British economy large sums extending over decades.

The victory of March 1807 - ending the slave trade, but not slavery, in the empire - was the first of many. By the end of the 19th century, slavery was illegal in most countries with functional legal systems. But making slavery illegal did not make it go away - as we see today. The League of Nations and subsequently the United Nations were presented with repeated cases of slavery and human trafficking. The hereditary forms of debt bondage slavery in south Asia were relatively untouched by national laws or international conventions. Since 1950, factors as diverse as war, environmental destruction, kleptocratic governments and ethnic cleansing have made populations especially vulnerable to enslavement. When the end of the cold war eliminated barriers between states, the trade in people accelerated.

From the 1990s and into the 21st century, slavery grew more quickly than our understanding of its size and reach. But as cases of human trafficking and slavery surfaced in London, Paris and New York, the official response was cautious. The British government did not sign the EU Convention on Human Trafficking until January 2007, the last of 26 countries to do so. That convention still requires further ratification to come into effect. As human trafficking is usually a cross-border crime, the convention will bring the laws of European countries into harmony, and provide more protection for the victims.

Industry, meanwhile, is making some progress independently of governments. The Cocoa Protocol, agreed between the European and North American chocolate industry, human-rights groups and trade unions, is aimed at removing slave labour from the cocoa supply chain. Signed in 2001, it sets up systems to inspect and certify cocoa at source, while mounting programmes to rescue slaves and educate farmers. There is currently no legal requirement for companies to police their supply chain, but more than \$10m has already been donated by the chocolate industry to anti-slavery projects.

As for the fourth estate, it often does as much to muddy the waters around slavery as work towards solutions. "Sex traffic" victims of enforced prostitution and pornography tend to receive the most attention, while people enslaved in other types of work are neglected. In Britain, Anti-Slavery International found cases in agriculture, construction and domestic work. Near Southampton, they discovered enslaved Polish workers packing chickens, and through the Citizens' Advice Bureau they met with unpaid Vietnamese workers in a major hotel chain. The official rhetoric against slavery is strong; yet proposed new rules for migrant domestic workers might increase their vulnerability to enslavement in the UK by linking their legal residence to working only for the employer who brought them here. In both Europe and North America, more training and resources are required to police slavery. Research in the US shows that about one-third of those liberated owed their freedom to the actions of ordinary citizens.

The good news about modern slavery is that, possibly for the first time in human history, it can be eradicated. With laws against it in every country, and the lack of any large vested economic interest supporting it, slavery can be ended when the public and governments make it a priority. Based on analysis of anti-slavery projects in south Asia and west Africa, the current estimated cost of the enforcement and

rehabilitation programmes needed to eradicate slavery around the world is about \$15bn over a 25-year period. This is approximately what Saudi Arabia is intending to spend in the UK buying military aircraft.

Money spent on ending slavery is more an investment than a donation. Freed slaves know how to work, and they will quickly begin to build assets, judging by the experience of anti-slavery groups. They will also become what they have never been allowed to be - consumers, buying food, clothing and education for their children. In areas with extensive slavery, liberation leads to economic growth. If we can connect the legal and economic dots, we can reasonably look to a future without slavery. Some of our strongest allies in ending slavery will be freed slaves. As more are liberated they will help guide us to better detection and better reintegration. As Given Kachepa, the young freed slave from Zambia, explained, "Sometimes you just have to look beneath the surface to know that slavery is still there."

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**Kevin Bales is president of Free the Slaves. His book, *Ending Slavery: How We Will Free Today's Slaves*, is published in September. He will be speaking as part of 100 Ideas at the Southbank Centre on March 22 at 7pm. The photography exhibition "Contemporary Global Slavery", organised by Hayward Touring in collaboration with Autograph ABP and Magnum Photos, will open at the Royal Festival Hall in February 2008. [www.southbankcentre.co.uk](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk)**

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