DEATH SPOTLIGHTS PLIGHT OF CHILD LABORERS

Pakistani boy campaigned worldwide

Dateline: LAHORE, PAKISTAN

IQBAL MASIH was only 12, but his brave fight to free other children from bonded labor under often extreme conditions won him international recognition. His murder on April 17 has brought a worldwide outcry and more demands for tougher action against child bondage, particularly in his own country, Pakistan.

The young activist from the small industrial town of Muridke gained public attention when he received $15,000 from the Reebok Human Rights Youth in Action Award in Boston last year, for his fight to restore the rights of children.

Some 3,000 protesters, many of them no older than 10, marched through the center of Lahore last week to commemorate his death and to demand an end to child labor in Pakistan, where workers as young as five earn as little as 1 rupee (three cents) a day. Eight to 10 million Pakistani children, or one-quarter of those aged 5 to 15, work in carpet-weaving factories, brick kilns, domestic service, small industries, and agriculture, according to estimates by nongovernmental groups.

Initial police investigations have found that the motive behind Iqbal's killing may have been drug related. Police say that he was shot when he caught an alleged drug addict in a compromising position, and that the murder apparently had nothing to do with the boy's activism.

The renewed international demands for action against child bondage have been joined by such eminent figures as the former United States President Jimmy Carter, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Jose Ayala-Lasso, and international human rights groups.

In an environment where factories and businesses have employed child laborers for years in clear violation of the country's laws, the emergence of Iqbal Masih as an activist has been particularly noteworthy. He gained widespread recognition through his work for the freedom of children, especially those who are forced to become laborers at exceptionally young ages.

Iqbal himself was sold into a carpet weaving business by his parents when he was 4. Six years later, he escaped with the help of a Pakistani nongovernmental organization, the Bonded Labour Liberation Front, and became an activist to fight for children's causes. “It is not often that people risk their own lives to bring hope and liberation to others” was how Mr. Carter described the boy in a statement condemning the killing.

The Pakistani government has condemned the killing and Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has ordered 200,000 rupees (US $6,450) in compensation be paid to Iqbal's mother. But family members who took part in last week's march said they did not want the money, only a investigation into the boy's death.
Julius Salik, Pakistan's minister for population welfare, has announced a "week of awareness," beginning today to educate Pakistanis on the plight of the country's children.

"We have ignored this issue in the past. We cannot continue to ignore it," Mr. Salik said in an interview. "If underprivileged groups continue to be suppressed, that will only create a bad international image of the country around the world." Salik has also promised to look for ways to pass further tough legislation, possibly by seeking the cooperation of the parliamentary opposition.

In Karachi Thursday, Ms. Bhutto conceded that her government had made little progress in abolishing child labor and said many Pakistanis did not consider it a serious problem. "The government effort to stop child labor has not achieved its objective because the people don't like the state to intrude in their affairs," Bhutto told a conference organized by UNESCO. Poor families continue to sell their children to factory owners because they need the money for food, Bhutto said. "There is... the need for creating social awareness against the practice." Ms. Bhutto said her government plans to make primary education compulsory. But the government would first have to build thousands of new schools, for which it may not have adequate funds.