

Official Statement of Côte d'Ivoire Government on the World Day to combat child labor, 06/12/05

Since almost three years ago, the ILO has decided to celebrate the World Day against child labor every June 12. This celebration provides an answer to ILO concerns to bring to the attention of the international community, including governments and populations on the children's suffering since their childhood to rough labor realities which seriously damage their physical, psychological and intellectual development.

According to statistics available, 211 million children from 5 to 14 years old and 141 million youngsters are working. This work has for consequence to take away children from schools, and endangers seriously their future because the access to education and to schooling is closed. The place of the child is at school not at work.

The Ivorian government considers the schooling of children as a priority, and is allocating 32.8% of the total budget to education. It has decided that school is free of charge, and would like to take this opportunity of the celebration to express its real concerns in front of this world issue which touches all countries including ours and explains its policy.

Côte d'Ivoire has ratified:

- The United Nations Convention in relation with the children rights on November 20, 1989
- The ILO Convention 138 on the minimum age to accede to work on June 26, 1973
- The ILO Convention 182 on the elimination of worst forms of child labor on June 17, 1999
- The African Chart of rights and welfare of children on July 1999
- The country has concluded on September 1st 2000 a cooperation agreement with Mali to combat child labor trafficking. We are examining currently with eight countries in the region the possibility to conclude a multilateral agreement on this issue.

Over the last twelve months, some progress has been made on the issue of child labor in Côte d'Ivoire.

- The National Committee to combat child labor has been installed on September 29, 2004. Two three-party workshops organized in October and February have brought to the determination of the list of worst forms of child labor for children under 15 in the agriculture, mining, trade, transportation, handicrafts, and other sectors.
- on May 4, 2005, there was a workshop to draw and finalize a national plan of action to combat child labor. Government priorities in combating child labor are divided into five points:
 - o capacity strengthening of government and non governmental agencies regarding combating child labor
 - o strengthening of legal framework through the elaboration of regulations in conformity with international norms on child labor
 - o better understanding of child labor issue through the design and implementation of a research program which combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches
 - o the sensitization of key actors of society in order to prevent child labor, particularly in its worst forms
 - o the retrieval, reinsertion or the repatriation of children victims of worst forms of child labor.

Recently, the Council of Ministers has agreed that the government fund for 1.2 billion CFA the pilot project in Oumé to set up a child labor monitoring system. An identical project funded by ILO through its WACAP program will start at the end of June 2005 in the following districts: Adzopé, Abengourou, Daloa, Soubré, and San Pédro.

For the government, these different projects which aim at eliminating effectively child labor and child exploitation in the cocoa culture require the mobilization and the perfect cooperation of political, administration authorities, as well as populations originated from these districts

This is an opportunity to remind that an impartial study funded by the Institut International pour l'Agriculture Tropicale (IITS), USAID and ILO has found our country not guilty of using slave children in the cocoa plantations.

Despite this study which has revealed that the participation of children in the cocoa production is marginal and occurs within a family framework, our responsibility as government, requires that we assure their protection and schooling.

This is one of the reasons for the existence of a pilot project of Oumé, designed to put in place an efficient system of child labor monitoring. It will identify children involved in worst forms of child labor, and direct them either into the regular teaching system or towards the acquisition of professional aptitudes and have the guarantee that they are not replaced by other children, or do not move from one sector to another one. The system will focus on prevention of child labor and social and economic protection of retrieved children and their families.

The Oumé pilot project has the objective is to eliminate completely the participation of children in the process of production of cocoa in Côte d'Ivoire and is one of key measures recommended and taken by the international seminar of cocoa certification held in Grand-Bassam on May 26-28, 2004.

As we see, despite the war experienced in Côte d'Ivoire, significant efforts are being undertaken by the Ivorian government with the priority set to combat against child labor.

This is the occasion to thank ILO, through its director Juan Somavia for the technical and financial support which has never lacked, for defining and implementing our national policy to combat child labor. I also thank all national and international NGO's as well as international organizations which are working continuously to eliminate child labor practices in Côte d'Ivoire. I will also not forget friendly countries which support our program, particularly the United States of America and France through the funding of WACAP and the basic survey of child labor.

The determination of the Ivorian government to combat child labor in order to insure a better future is unquestionable. But it will not be profitable to the whole population of children if peace is not established in the country.

In fact, a phenomenon, new in Côte d'Ivoire, but a very serious one, has occurred in the "occupied zones" of our country, the use of soldier-children. I would like to take the opportunity of this commemoration to re-emphasize to the national and international community the cry from the heart launched in 2004 which was unfortunately not heard enough. In the occupied zones, children from 11 to 16 years are using weapons, dangerous for them, and to others. The use of children as soldiers is unacceptable no matter the reason. It is a true insult to humanity, a serious violation of children rights, notably the ILO Convention 182 which considers it as a worst form of child labor, which must be ended.

It is urgent to save children which were forced to take weapons to survive because of the war. Their place is at school and not on the battle fields. Therefore, we must go to the disarmament in order to avoid that these children get used to weapons. That could compromise seriously their reinsertion in the society.

This is an urgent appeal that I would like, on behalf of the Ivorian government, to re-emphasize once more time to all Ivorians, living in the national territory, to the international community, as well as to all involved in providing solutions to the Ivorian crisis to work on retrieving innocent children from the hands of those who exploit cowardly their weaknesses, their physics, and their innocence.

Children represent the future of our country and it is important that we take care of them at a moment in which we are writing the painful and tragic pages of the history of our young nation. If we are conscious about the dangers that they could face, then there is some hope.

Thank you.