

Cocoa industry to fight slavery

Pact follows exposé on farms' child labor

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WASHINGTON --- The chocolate industry will announce today that it has accepted responsibility for labor practices on cocoa farms and will work with child labor experts, lawmakers, growers and unions to eliminate child slavery and other forms of exploitation.

The action plan comes just months after industry insiders said they did not know that cocoa farmers were enslaving children in Ivory Coast, a West African nation that supplies 43 percent of U.S. cocoa, the raw ingredient of chocolate. A Knight Ridder investigation published in June found that some boys as young as 11 were sold or tricked into slavery to harvest cocoa beans in Ivory Coast.

The government of Ivory Coast and anti-slavery organizations have endorsed the chocolate industry's plan. The strategy calls for eliminating child slavery, independently monitoring farms for working conditions, and, by 2005, certifying that no "worst forms of child labor" — including slavery — are used to produce chocolate and cocoa.

COCOA FROM SLAVERY, BA

Cocoa from slavery

(continued)

Experts say it will be the first time an agricultural industry has taken responsibility for its product from harvesting to market.

"We need to be permanently concerned with where cocoa comes from, the impact of cocoa on the environment and how the workers are treated," said Larry Graham, president of the Chocolate Manufacturers Association, the U.S. industry trade group. "That's where the industry has changed, permanently."

The agreement has been signed by the manufacturers' association and the World Cocoa Foundation; executives of chocolate makers Hershey's,

M&M Mars, Nestle, World's Finest Chocolate, Inc.; and chiefs of cocoa processors Blommer Chocolate Co., Guittard Chocolates, Barry Callebaut and Archer Daniels Midland Co.

It also has been endorsed by members of Congress; the director of the International Labor Organization's child labor office; Free the Slaves and the Child Labor Coalition, two human rights groups that focus on child slavery; the International Cocoa Organization, which represents cocoa growing countries; the European Cocoa Association; CAOBISCO, a trade association of European chocolate companies; the National Consumer League; and an international union for

food and agriculture workers.

"Most consumers in America and around the world don't want to buy chocolate made from cocoa beans harvested by child slaves. This breakthrough agreement will yield the first ever global capacity in the agriculture and food processing sector to publicly and credibly certify that cocoa and chocolate products ... have been produced without any of the worst forms of child labor," said Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, who pushed the industry to devise the plan.

"This is quite a step forward to accepting responsibility. It's the difference between rhetoric of saying we are global citizens and being global citizens," said Kevin Bales of Free the Slaves, the American wing of the London-based watchdog group Anti-Slav-

ery International Bales is the author of the book "Disposable People, New Slavery in the Global Economy" and is working with the manufacturers' association and the International Labor Organization to monitor and implement the agreement's goals.

It isn't known how many children are enslaved. The State Department's human rights report for 2000 estimated that 15,000 child slaves toil on cocoa, cotton and coffee farms in Ivory Coast. The first step in the action plan is to determine, by Dec. 31, how widespread child slavery is.

The International Labor Organization's office on child labor is working with the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture to survey conditions on cocoa farms. The research teams are expected to be in the fields by late

October when the harvest season is under way, said Bales, who is helping to design the survey.

The plan sets deadlines for completing the survey and for setting up an independent monitoring system to ensure cocoa is not picked by child slaves in Ivory Coast. The industry will spend millions — the exact amount has not been determined — to set up a foundation that will work with child labor experts and local advocacy groups in Ivory Coast to improve labor practices and ensure compliance.

"What we do in West Africa becomes a model for what we do in other (cocoa growing) areas," said Graham, the Chocolate Manufacturers Association president.

The plan does not address what to do about children who are currently enslaved or

abused on cocoa farms.

"Once we know how much and where, then we can take positive action," said Bales.

The U.S. House of Representatives voted 291-115 on June 28 to look into setting up a labeling system to reassure consumers that no slave labor was used to harvest cocoa beans in U.S. products. Industry representatives then met with lawmakers to work out the action plan before the Senate passed its own labeling provision.

"I am happy with it, but I think the proof will be in the pudding," said Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., who authored the House labeling initiative. "There are guidelines and timetables so we can monitor their progress. If we don't feel they are on target ... we will do legislation and hit them over the head," he said.