

Chocolate Redemption

By Terry Collingsworth (Executive Director of International Rights Advocates)

Easter is the biggest day for chocolate sales in the United States. Unfortunately, most of the Easter candy American children will enjoy is harvested by children in Cote D'Ivoire and Ghana. These countries collectively supply over 70% of the world's cocoa sold to consumers by the major chocolate brands, and most of it is harvested with child labor. I know this because I have been researching child slavery in West African cocoa production for over twenty years. After exhausting other avenues to persuade the major companies to stop using child labor, on February 12, 2021, on behalf of eight formerly enslaved children who were trafficked from Mali to harvest cocoa in Cote D'Ivoire, I filed a federal lawsuit under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. These children sued the chocolate companies that control the cocoa supply chain: Nestle, Cargill (a large producer of cocoa which sells to Nestle and others), Hershey, Mars, Mondelez (which makes Cadbury and Toblerone), Barry Callebaut (which produces KitKat and Dairy Milk), and Olam (which sells cocoa to chocolate companies). This new case joins an earlier case I filed against Nestle and Cargill on behalf of six formerly enslaved children that was argued in the Supreme Court on December 1, 2020.

If you find it hard to believe that African children are harvesting most of the world's cocoa, and you should in the year 2021, a U.S. Department of Labor-funded study by the University of Chicago, released in October 2020, found there are 1.58 *million* children harvesting cocoa in West Africa, a major increase in the number since a 2015 study. Further, the study found 95% of these children are performing hazardous work. Kids like these:



The children that almost certainly harvested some of your Easter candy were required to use machetes to cut down and open cocoa pods and apply dangerous pesticides and herbicides without any protective equipment.

The big cocoa companies have proven they won't stop abusing children until they are forced to do so. Not only do the companies know about the horrific abuse of children in their cocoa supply chains, after this fact was widely exposed, to avoid proposed legislation to ban the importation of their cocoa, in 2001 the companies signed a "voluntary" initiative, the "Harkin-Engle Protocol," and pledged to work together to end child labor in their cocoa supply chains by 2005. The Protocol is an admission that the companies know children are harvesting their cocoa and a promise to stop using the child labor they could no longer deny. The major chocolate

companies signed the Protocol, and it beautifully served their purposes -- they appeared to be doing something to end child labor but could keep profiting from cheap cocoa harvested by children until they met their self-imposed deadline. Instead of ending child labor, the companies have unilaterally extended their deadline three times, and now claim they will “reduce by 70%” their use of child labor by 2025. The companies have thus given themselves permission to use child labor to harvest cocoa for your consumption until they decide to end this horrific but highly profitable practice.

Chances are good for a legal victory, but the wheels of justice grind slowly. These companies will spend millions of dollars on lawyers and public relations firms to delay justice and continue misleading the public. The companies must view having a steady source of cheap cocoa harvested by children as very profitable if they are willing to spend millions to protect the current system rather than simply fix the problem as they promised twenty years ago.

The reason deny and delay is a realistic option for the companies is they are confident that most consumers of their chocolate don't know about the African children who harvest their cocoa. Now that you know, do you care enough to stop being an active participant in a chocolate supply chain that depends on the exploitation of 1.58 million African children? If your children understood this, would they urge you to be kind to the children you are linked to each time you buy chocolate from these big companies? Easter is the perfect time to experience personal redemption and end your support for a cocoa supply chain that starts with the massive exploitation of African children and ends with you, the consumer. Tell the companies you won't buy their chocolate until they keep their promise made in the 2001 Protocol. Don't worry, you can still enjoy excellent Easter chocolate produced by the ethical companies listed at SlaveFreeChocolate.org.