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## Africa's World of Forced Labor, in a 6-Year-Old's Eyes

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KETE KRACHI, [Ghana](#) — Just before 5 a.m., with the sky still dark over Lake Volta, Mark Kwadwo was roused from his spot on the damp dirt floor. It was time for work.

Shivering in the predawn chill, he helped paddle a canoe a mile out from shore. For five more hours, as his coworkers yanked up a fishing net, inch by inch, Mark bailed water to keep the canoe from swamping.

He last ate the day before. His broken wooden paddle was so heavy he could barely lift it. But he raptly followed each command from Kwadwo Takyi, the powerfully built 31-year-old in the back of the canoe who freely deals out beatings.

"I don't like it here," he whispered, out of Mr. Takyi's earshot.

Mark Kwadwo is 6 years old. About 30 pounds, dressed in a pair of blue and red underpants and a Little Mermaid T-shirt, he looks more like an oversized toddler than a boat hand. He is too little to understand why he has wound up in this fishing village, a two-day trek from his home.

But the three older boys who work with him know why. Like Mark, they are indentured servants, leased by their parents to Mr. Takyi for as little as \$20 a year.

Until their servitude ends in three or four years, they are as trapped as the fish in their nets, forced to work up to 14 hours a day, seven days a week, in a trade that even adult fishermen here call punishing and, at times, dangerous.

Mr. Takyi's boys — conscripts in a miniature labor camp, deprived of schooling, basic necessities and freedom — are part of a vast traffic in children that supports West and Central African fisheries, quarries, cocoa and rice plantations and street markets. The girls are domestic servants, bread bakers, prostitutes. The boys are field workers, cart pushers, scavengers in abandoned gem and gold mines.

By no means is the child trafficking trade uniquely African. Children are forced to race camels in the Middle East, weave carpets in India and fill brothels all over the developing world.

The [International Labor Organization](#), a [United Nations](#) agency, estimates that 1.2 million are sold into servitude every year in an illicit trade that generates as much as \$10 billion annually.

Studies show they are most vulnerable in Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Africa's children, the world's poorest, account for roughly one-sixth of the trade, according to the labor organization. Data is notoriously scarce, but it suggests victimization of African children on a huge scale.

A 2002 study supervised by the labor organization estimated that nearly 12,000 trafficked children toiled in the cocoa fields of Ivory Coast alone. The children, who had no relatives in the area, cleared fields with machetes, applied pesticides and sliced open cocoa pods for beans.

In an analysis in February, [Unicef](#) says child trafficking is growing in West and Central Africa, driven by huge profits and partly controlled by organized networks that transport children both within and between countries.

“We know it is a huge problem in Africa,” said Pamela Shifman, a child protection officer at the New York headquarters of Unicef. “A lot of it is visible. You see the kids being exploited. You watch it happen. Somebody brought the kids to the place where they are. Somebody exploited their vulnerability.”

Otherwise, she asked, “How did they get there?”

John R. Miller, the director of the State Department Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, said the term trafficking failed to convey the brutality of what was occurring.

“A child does not consent,” he said. “The loss of choice, the deception, the use of frauds, the keeping of someone at work with little or no pay, the threats if they leave — it is slavery.”

Some West African families see it more as a survival strategy. In a region where nearly two-thirds of the population lives on less than \$1 a day, the compensation for the temporary loss of a child keeps the rest of the family from going hungry. Some parents argue that their children are better off learning a trade than starving at home.

Indeed, the notion that children should be in the care of their parents is not a given in much of African society.

Parents frequently hand off children to even distant relatives if it appears they will have a chance at education and more opportunity.

Only in the past six years or so has it become clear how traffickers take advantage of this custom to buy and sell children, sometimes with no more ceremony than a goat deal.

In 2001, 35 children, half of them under age 15, were discovered aboard a vessel in a Benin port. They said they were being shipped to Gabon to work.

In 2003, Nigerian police rescued 194 malnourished children from stone quarries north of Lagos. At least 13 other children had died and been buried near the pits, the police said.

Last year, Nigerian police stumbled upon 64 girls aged 14 and younger, packed inside a refrigerated truck built to haul frozen fish. They had traveled hundreds of miles from central Nigeria, the police said, and were destined for work as housemaids in Lagos.

In response to such reports, African nations have passed a raft of legislation against trafficking, adopting or strengthening a dozen laws last year alone.

There were nearly 200 prosecutions of traffickers on the continent last year, four times as many as in 2003, according to the State Department’s trafficking office.

Some countries are encouraging villages to form their own surveillance committees. In Burkina Faso, the government reported, such committees, together with the police, freed 644 children from traffickers in 2003. Still, government officials in the region say, only a tiny fraction of victims are detected.

Ghana, an Oregon-size nation of 21 million people, has yet to prosecute anyone under the new antitrafficking law it adopted last December. But the government has taken other steps — including eliminating school fees that forced youngsters out of classrooms, increasing birth registrations so that children have legal identities and extending small loans to about 1,200 mothers to give them alternatives to leasing out their children.

The International Organization for Migration, an intergovernmental agency set up after World War II to help refugees, has also mounted a United States-financed program to rescue children from the fishing industry.

Since 2003, the organization says, 587 children have been freed from Ghana's Lake Volta region, taken to shelters for counseling and medical treatment, then reunited with parents or relatives.

“We sign a social contract with the fishermen,” said Eric Peasah, the agency's Ghana field representative. “If they have 10 children, we say, ‘Release four, and you can't get more, or you will be prosecuted.’ Once they sign that, we come back and say we want to release more.”

To reduce child trafficking significantly, said Marilyn Amponsah Annan, who is in charge of children's issues for the Ghanaian government, adults must be convinced that children have the right to be educated, to be protected, and to be spared adult burdens — in short, the right to a childhood.

“You see so many children with so many fishermen,” she said. “Those little hands, those little bodies. It is always very sad, because this is the world of adults.”

“We have to educate these communities because they do not know any other way of existence. They believe this is what they need to do to survive.”

That is the fishermen's favorite defense in Kete Krachi, a day's drive through dense forests from Ghana's capital, Accra. For the area's roughly 9,000 residents, fishing is their lifeblood. Children keep it going.

Nearly every canoe here holds at least a few of them, some no older than 5 or 6, often supervised by a teenager. A dozen boys, interviewed in their canoes or as they sewed up ratty nets ashore, spoke of backbreaking toil, 100-hour workweeks and frequent beatings. They bore a pervasive fear of diving into the lake's murky waters to free a tangled net, and never resurfacing.

One 10-year-old said he was sometimes so exhausted that he fell asleep as he paddled. Asked when he rested, another boy paused from his net mending, seemingly confused. “This is what you see now,” he said.

They never see the pittance they earn. The fishermen say they pay parents or relatives each December, typically on trips to the families' villages during the December holidays.

The children's sole comfort seems to be the shared nature of their misery, a camaraderie of lost boys who have not seen their families in years, have no say in their fate and, in some cases, were lured by false promises of schooling or a quick homecoming.

On Nkomi, a grassy island in the lake, Kwasi Tweranim, in his mid to late teens, and Kwadwo Seaako, perhaps 12 or 13, seemed united by fear and resentment of their boss. Both bear inchlong scars on their scalps where, they said, he struck them with a wooden paddle.

“I went down to disentangle the net, and when I came up, my master said that I had left part of it down there,” Kwasi said. “Then I saw black, and woke up in another boat. Only the grace of God saved me.”

Kwadwo, stammering badly, said he had been punished when the net rolled in the water.

Not every fisherman is so pitiless. Christian Lissah employs eight children under 13, mostly distant relatives. He said he knew many children who were treated no better than workhorses, and some who had drowned.

“In general, this is not a good practice because people mishandle the children,” he said. Yet he said he could not imagine how he would fish profitably without child workers, and depends on friends and acquaintances to keep him supplied — for a commission.

“You must get people who are a very low background who need money,” he said. “Some of them are eager to release their children.”

Mark Kwadwo’s parents, Joe Obrenu and his wife, Ama, were an easy sell. Mr. Obrenu fished the seas off Aboadzi, a hilly, sun-drenched town on the Gulf of Guinea, and his wife dried the catch for sale. But the two often ran short of food, said Mark’s aunt, Adwoa Awotwe. Over the years, they sold five of their children into labor, she said, including Mark’s 9-year-old sister Hagar, who performs domestic chores for Mr. Takyi.

Mr. Obrenu drummed up other recruits from neighbors, sometimes to their lasting regret. “It was hunger, to get a little money; the whole today, I have not eaten,” said Efua Mansah, whose 7-year-old son, Kwabena, boarded a small blue bus with Mr. Takyi four years ago for the 250-mile trip to Kete Krachi.

She has seen him only twice since then. In all that time, Mr. Takyi has paid her \$66, she said, a third of which she spent on buses and ferries to pick up the money.

In her one-room hut decorated with empty plastic bottles, she forced back tears. “I want to bring my son home,” she said.

Mark also cried when his turn to leave came this year, his aunt said, so his mother told him that Mr. Takyi would take him to his father. Instead, he was brought to Mr. Takyi’s compound of caked mud huts, to a dark six-foot-square cubicle with a single tiny window. He shares it with five other children, buzzing flies and a few buckets of fish bait.

In two days, a smile never creased Mark’s delicate features. He seldom offered more than a nod or a shake of the head, with a few telling exceptions: “I was beaten in the house. I can’t remember what I did, but he caned me,” he said of Mr. Takyi.

Mr. Takyi, who sleeps and works in the same gray T-shirt, is disarmingly frank about his household. He can afford to feed the children only twice a day, he said, and cannot clothe them adequately. He himself has been paddling the lake since age 8.

“I can understand how the children feel,” he said. “Because I didn’t go to school, this is work I must do. I also find it difficult.”

Yet he does not hesitate to break a branch from the nearest tree to wake the boys for the midnight shift.

“Almost all the boys are very troublesome,” he complained. “I want them to be humble children, but they don’t obey my orders.”

One recent morning, his young crew, wrapped in thin bedsheets for warmth, hiked in the darkness down to the shore.

They paddled out in two leaky but stable canoes, searching the water for a piece of foam that marked where their net was snagged on submerged tree stumps. Kwabena, 11, stripped off his cutoff shorts and dived in with an 18-year-old to free it, yanking it at one point with his teeth.

Mark has not mastered the rhythm of paddling. Mr. Takyi said the boy cries when the water is rough or he is cold. He cannot swim a stroke. If the canoe capsizes, Mr. Takyi said, he will save him.

“I can’t pay what is asked for older boys,” Mr. Takyi said, as Mark bailed out the canoe with the sawed-off bottom of a plastic cooking oil container. “That is why I go for this. When I get money, I go to get another one.”

In the other canoe, Kwame Akuban and Kofi Quarshie plucked fish from the net with the air of prisoners waiting for their terms to end.

Kofi, 10, said his mother had told him his earnings would feed their family. But he suspects another motive. “They didn’t like me,” he said softly.

Kwame, 12, said his parents had promised to retrieve him in a year’s time and send him to school.

“I have been here three years and I am not going home, and I am not happy,” he said quietly.

As if on cue, Mr. Takyi shouted: “Remove the fish faster, or I will cane you.”

Running away is a common fantasy among the boys. Kofi Nyankom, who came from Mark’s hometown three years ago, at age 9, was one of the few to actually try it.

Last December, he ran to town half-naked, his back a mass of bruises. He said Mr. Takyi had tied him up and whipped him.

George Achibra, a school district official, demanded that the police intervene, and Mr. Takyi was forced to let Kofi go.

But before many weeks passed, he had brought in a replacement — younger, more helpless, more submissive. It was Mark Kwadwo.

