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Cocoa Crimes

By Sally Blundell

In our last issue of Vital we covered a US lawsuit filed against cocoa giants Nestle, Cargill, and Archer Daniels Midland for their involvement in child abuses on cocoa farms in Cote D'Ivoire. On February 6, as the chocolate industry geared up for Valentines Day, the case went before a court in Los Angeles. The plaintiffs are three former child workers trafficked from Mali to Cote D'Ivoire where they were forced to work on cocoa farms. They claimed that, as the dominant companies in the cocoa sector of Cote D'Ivoire, these three companies essentially own and control all aspects of the production system. They argued that the defendants were aware of systematic child labour and that they provided substantial support to the farmers using child slaves, making them aiders and abettors of these crimes. Represented by the International Labor Rights Fund, the plaintiffs are suing the companies under the Alien Tort Statute and the Torture Victims Protection Act for forced child labour and torture. The defendants argued that they are innocent purchasers of cocoa and have nothing to do with the labour practices in Cote D'Ivoire. They went on to disown their extensive public commitment to address the well-known child labour problem, including their various 'codes of conduct', now claiming that they were mere 'voluntary pledges'. A ruling is expected on the case before April. In the meantime Trade Aid is asking why a civilised country such as New Zealand is condoning practices that were outlawed in the 19th century. While we have laws to protect children in this country, buying goods made by forced child labour in another country is legal and as such can be seen as an endorsement of those practices. Trade Aid is looking to Parliament to make such practices illegal.

Left: Boys with machetes, Soubré region of the Cote D'Ivoire

Middle: Young boy raking cocoa beans on drying rack, Soubré region of the Cote D'Ivoire

Right: Boy with machete, Soubré region of the Cote D'Ivoire

(Photographs courtesy of the International Labor Rights Fund)

