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Indentured Servants In America

By BOB HERBERT

A must-read for anyone who favors an expansion of guest worker programs in the U.S. is a stunning new report from the Southern Poverty Law Center that details the widespread abuse of highly vulnerable, poverty-stricken workers in programs that already exist.

The report is titled "Close to Slavery: Guestworker Programs in the United States." It will be formally released today at a press conference in Washington.

Workers recruited from Mexico, South America, Asia and elsewhere to work in American hotels and in such labor-intensive industries as forestry, seafood processing and construction are often ruthlessly exploited.

They are routinely cheated out of their wages, which are low to begin with. They are bound like indentured servants to the middlemen and employers who arrange their work tours in the U.S. And they are virtual hostages of the American companies that employ them.

The law does not allow these "guests" to change jobs while they're here. If a particular employer is unscrupulous, as is very often the case, the worker has little or no recourse.

One of the guest workers profiled in the report was a psychology student recruited in the Dominican Republic to work at a hotel in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The woman had taken on \$4,000 in debt to cover "fees" and other expenses that were required for her to get a desk job that paid \$6 an hour.

But after a month, her hours were steadily reduced until she was working only 15 or 20 hours a week. That left her with barely enough money to survive, and with no way of paying off her crushing debt.

The woman and her fellow guest workers had hardly enough money for food. "We would just buy Chinese food because it was the cheapest," she said. "We would buy one plate a day and share it between two or three people." She told the authors of the report: "I felt like an animal without claws -- defenseless. It is the same as slavery."

Steven Greenhouse of The Times recently reported on a waiter from Indonesia who took on \$6,000 in debt to become a guest worker. He arrived in North Carolina expecting to do farm work but found that there was no job for him at all.

The report focused primarily on the 120,000 foreign workers who are allowed into the U.S. each year to work on farms or at other low-skilled jobs. In most cases the guest workers take on a heavy debt load to

participate in the program, anywhere from \$500 to more than \$10,000. Worried about the welfare of their families back home, and with the huge debt hanging over their heads, the workers are most often docile, even in the face of the most egregious treatment.

The result, said the report, is that they are "systematically exploited and abused."

Some of the worst abuses occur in the forestry industry. The report said, "Virtually every forestry company that the Southern Poverty Law Center has encountered provides workers with pay stubs showing that they have worked substantially fewer hours than they actually worked."

A favorite (and extremely cruel) tactic of employers is the seizure of guest workers' identity documents, such as passports and Social Security cards. That leaves the workers incredibly vulnerable.

"Numerous employers have refused to return these documents even when the worker simply wanted to return to his home country," the report said. "The Southern Poverty Law Center also has encountered numerous incidents where employers destroyed passports or visas in order to convert workers into undocumented status."

Without their papers the workers live in abject fear of encountering the authorities, who will treat them as illegals. They are completely at the mercy of the employers.

President Bush has been relentless in his push to greatly expand guest worker programs as part of his effort to revise the nation's immigration laws. To expand these programs without looking closely at the gruesome abuses already taking place would be both tragic and ridiculous.

"This is not a situation where there are just a few bad-apple employers," said Mary Bauer, director of the Immigrant Justice Project at the Southern Poverty Law Center, which has initiated a number of lawsuits on behalf of abused workers. "Our experience is that it's the very structure of the program that lends itself to abuse."