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Information on Senegal

Compliance with ILO Convention No.182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (ratified in 2000)

Forced child begging in Senegal

In 2009, Anti-Slavery International published research on *talibés* (Koranic students or 'disciples') in Senegal.¹ These are boys who are sent to live in *daaras* (religious boarding schools) to learn the Koran from *marabouts* (religious teachers). Most *daaras* do not charge students for their studies, food and accommodation, and instead send the *talibés* out to beg.

Although there are no reliable estimates of the total number of *talibés* in Senegal, large numbers can clearly be seen begging on the streets of Senegal's cities. The NGO Tostan, who conducted the research for this study in Senegal, calculates that it has had contact with around 6000 *talibés* in Thiès² in recent years.

The research involved 107 current *talibés* and a further nine boys in their communities of origin, who either had been *talibés* or were at risk of becoming *talibés*. 76 parents of *talibés*, 22 *marabouts* and 18 adults who either give to *talibés* or work with them also took part in the research. Participants came from the city of Thiès or from two villages in the St. Louis and Kaolack regions of the country. The eight *daaras* which formed the focus of this research contained a total of almost 300 *talibés* and in all of them, *talibés* were sent out to beg on a daily basis. All of the *talibés* included in the research can be classified as having been forced to beg.

Forced child begging: a worst form of child labour

In Senegal, *talibés* are almost always male. Those forced to beg are predominantly younger boys, with many starting at around the age of five or six. It is rare for older *talibés* to beg. These boys are either sent back to their villages, having completed their Koranic schooling, or take on a different role in the *daara* supervising the younger children. Boys who took part in the research came from all over the country. Several boys came from neighbouring countries including Gambia, Mali and Guinea-Bissau.

¹ The research was managed by Anti-Slavery International on forced child begging in Senegal, India and Albania. The research in Senegal was conducted by partner agency Tostan: Emily Delap, *Begging for Change*, Anti-Slavery International, London 2009.

² The UN estimates that the population of Thiès, Senegal's second largest city, is approximately 320,000.

Violence and coercion

Talibés are forced to beg through the use of violent or coercive measures. Boys from seven of the eight *daaras* included in the research spoke of being coerced into begging in some way by their *marabouts* or, in a number of *daaras*, by older *talibés*, who are used by the *marabout* to enforce discipline. Some children are more afraid of these older boys than of the *marabouts*. Techniques include denial of food and violence. Fifteen children who were interviewed reported that they are beaten if they do not bring back enough income.

This was also backed up by reports from volunteers and NGO staff working to support *talibés*. One co-ordinator of a centre for street children reported that around half of the children who come to the centre for support have run away from abusive *marabouts*. Volunteers who act as surrogate mothers to the *talibés* told stories of caring for *talibés*, who repeatedly ran away from *daaras* because of violence on the part of the *marabout*.

Although two *marabouts* acknowledged that they beat *talibés* if they ‘behave badly,’ most of those who were interviewed claimed that they do not beat children to encourage them to beg, or even ask them to bring back fixed sums of money. Some *marabouts* even went as far as to say that children choose to go out begging themselves and enjoy the opportunity to earn money. Some *talibés* backed up these claims, saying that they were not forced to beg, and would be allowed to remain in the *daara* for the day if they were sick. However, further probing usually suggested that the degree of choice that *talibés* have over their daily lives is, in reality, very limited.

Although most *talibés* said they were met with kindness and generosity from shop keepers, neighbours, people who give to them regularly and passers-by, many also recounted abusive behaviour and hurtful comments.

Income and working hours

The *talibés* interviewed for this research, many of whom were as young as five or six years old, spend an average of five hours each day begging. This begging is on top of three to seven hours of Koranic tuition. *Talibés* earn CFA250-300 (US\$0.60-0.70) per day and hand over most or all of this money to their *marabout*. An averaged sized *daara* has 25 *talibés*. Evidence from the research suggests that few *marabouts* make vast profits from children begging. The research does indicate, however, that some *marabouts*, who have a lot of *talibés* in their *daara*, can earn more than is needed to maintain the *daara*. For example, with a *daara* of 50 *talibés*, a *marabout* might earn CFA350,000 (US\$770) per month. Some *marabouts* live with their *talibés* in half-built houses for free, but even if rent and other costs eat into these ‘profits,’ a *marabout* in such a *daara* could still expect to earn well in excess of the CFA125,000 (US\$275), the average monthly salary of primary school teachers in Senegal. The *marabouts* often use this money to fulfil their obligations to family members or others whom they provide for financially back in their home communities.

Seydou* is 15 years old and comes from Dakar where both of his parents sell snacks on the streets. He has lived in the *daara* for seven years, and recently

one of his younger brothers came to the *daara* to join him. Seydou usually wakes up at 6am and spends the first hour of the day learning the Koran. Then, with an empty tin can, he goes from one house to another to beg for food for his breakfast. He returns to the *daara* at 9am, at which time the morning courses begin. At 1pm Seydou goes to neighbouring houses to beg for his lunch, coming back to the *daara* for an hour or so to rest and eat. The afternoon classes begin at 3pm. At around 5pm every day, Seydou goes to collect water for the *daara* with other *talibés*. He then studies the Koran for another three hours, before going out at 8pm to beg for his dinner. He comes back to the *daara* to study the Koran some more before bed time at around 10pm. He sleeps in a small hut with a straw roof alongside seven other children. Seydou says that if he doesn't beg, he won't eat, and if he doesn't bring back enough money on two or three occasions, the marabout will beat him. He misses his parents and would rather be at home with them than in the *daara*. He says that he likes learning the Koran, but would also like to know some French so that he could read road signs.

*name has been changed.

Contact with family and living conditions

Most of the *talibés* included in the research live in *daaras* far away from their villages and see their parents only a few times each year. Some have been in the *daara* for many years and have no contact at all with home. Boys report missing their parents dreadfully, and mothers also express great feelings of loss for their sons.

Talibés reported crowded and unhygienic living conditions in the *daaras* with no running water and electricity, limited washing facilities, and ten to 20 boys sharing one room and sleeping on thin mats on the floor.

Often, *marabouts* and *talibés* live in abandoned and half-constructed buildings, which have dirty floors and are often flea-infested. Some of the buildings do not even have all of the walls or the roof constructed, providing them little protection from the elements. Once the owner of the building has the financial resources to complete its construction, the *marabouts* and *talibés* must find somewhere else to live.

Participants in the research reported cases of stomach problems, flu and malaria. Key informants in Dakar found incidents of cholera due to poor hygiene. Crowded and unhygienic conditions also result in skin conditions, eye infections and embarrassment about “smelling bad.”

The causes of forced child begging

There are a number of interrelated causes of forced child begging in Senegal, including poverty and a lack of access to good quality affordable state-run education.

Poverty is frequently claimed to be behind parents' decisions to send boys to *daaras* and the *marabouts'* justification for making *talibés* go out to beg. Many of the parents interviewed in the two village communities of origin visited for the research said that they sent their sons to *daaras* because they lack the resources to care for all

of their children at home: “*We send our children away to protect them from the crisis at home... It’s a way to lessen our poverty.*” (Father of a *talibé* from a source village in Senegal). Extreme poverty in the two villages was evident, with few amenities, and families living in mud and straw huts and often going without adequate food. Participants reported that the situation was especially bad at the time they were being interviewed owing to a period of prolonged drought and desertification.

High levels of poverty mean that parents are rarely able to provide any resources to *marabouts* in return for teaching the Koran to their sons. As a result, most parents included in the research believed that it was fair for *marabouts* to send their sons out to beg. *Marabouts* argue that they are no longer able to farm due to drought and loss of land, and so must make the *talibés* go out to beg to maintain the *daaras*. The *talibés* themselves repeatedly said that they needed to beg for their survival.

Although it clearly plays an instrumental role, poverty alone cannot explain this form of exploitation. Evidence suggests that some *marabouts* gain in excess of the income needed to maintain their *daaras* from children begging.

The evidence gathered from Senegal shows that parents value Koranic teaching. However, it is offered in a context where the state-system is inaccessible to many. Some boys enter the *daara*, with consequent exposure to forced child begging, because there are no other options for their schooling. Parents in both of the source villages visited for the research said that they were reluctant to send their sons to local state-run schools as they were several kilometres away and involved unaffordable costs.

However, forced child begging is not an inevitable or intrinsic part of Koranic schooling, and there are other ways for children to learn the Koran without being exploited in this way. Furthermore, many parents and children would prefer to combine Koranic schooling with a broader state education, arguing that this would enhance job prospects and the ability to operate in modern society.

Religious culture in Senegal also plays a key role in decisions to send children out to beg. Learning the Koran is seen to be very important and the *daara* system is deeply entrenched in Senegalese society. *Marabouts* are highly respected figures, influential in community and political life. Although the decision to send boys to *daaras* is in a large part determined by poverty, and a desire for children to receive education, it is also shaped by respect for *marabouts* and a wish for children to learn the Koran and religious values.

However, whilst the evidence provided above points towards a link between forced child begging and interpretations of religious culture, it is also important to acknowledge the limits and changing nature of this relationship. When the ‘*daara* system’ was established in Senegal in the 1700s, begging played only a minor role in ensuring the upkeep of the *daara* and in teaching children lessons in humility. It was only with the move to urban centres in the 1960s and 70s, that begging began to take up a significant part of *talibés’* time. This move has been linked to a series of droughts and a decline in commodity prices, making it harder for *marabouts* to gain adequate income from the land.

The legal framework and government response

Senegal has ratified ILO Conventions 138 on minimum ages for employment, 182 on the worst forms of child labour and 29 on forced labour.

The Government is participating in an ILO-IPEC Time-bound programme (TBP) on the worst forms of child labour and an ILO-IPEC project entitled “Contribution to the abolition of child labour in French-speaking Africa”.³

The Government is aware that something needs to be done to help *talibés* and other especially vulnerable groups of children. The President has spoken publicly of the need to address the problem, and the Ministry of Family Affairs recently conducted awareness-raising workshops about forced child begging in Dakar and other areas of the country⁴.

The Government also introduced legislation, which could go a long way towards tackling the issue. The Law to Combat Trafficking in Persons and Related Practices and to Protect Victims (2005) devotes a section to forced begging. It provides for fines and imprisonment for anyone found guilty of organising or pressuring another person to beg for their own benefit, with a reference to the particular vulnerability of children in this situation. However, to date it appears to represent a modest response compared with the scale and gravity of the problem. For example, a *marabout* who beat a *talibé* to death was sentenced to four years' imprisonment under this law in 2007. Only two *marabouts* were arrested for physical abuse in 2005 and three in 2006, despite such behaviour being “widely known and discussed”.⁵

This suggests that the Government is taking some steps, but still failing to take adequate action to protect *talibés*. NGO staff, interviewed as part of the research, argued that Government inaction is linked to a lack of resources and a reliance on the political support of senior *marabouts*, which makes them wary of addressing this sensitive topic.

Conclusions and recommendations

Talibés who are forced to beg work long hours, receive little or no pay, experience physical abuse and other forms of threats and coercion, and are separated from their families for long periods in crowded and unhygienic living conditions.

Poverty lies at the heart of forced child begging, alongside causes such as a lack of access to good quality and affordable state-run education, and the desire on the part of parents' for their children to learn the Koran. While religious culture is used to support begging, it seems that the practice of sending *talibés* out to beg is a reflection of prevailing economic conditions rather than an inevitable or intrinsic part of Koranic schooling or the religious culture in Senegal.

³ ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations Individual Observation concerning Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No.138) Senegal, Published 2009

⁴ US Department of State, Trafficking in Person report 2008, p220

⁵ US Department of State, Trafficking in Persons report 2008, p220

Forced child begging is a worst form of child labour and as such requires urgent action by the government. The Government is aware of the problem and has taken some steps to address it, but is still failing to take adequate action to protect *talibés*.

The 2009 report of the Committee of Experts observed that “although legislation is in conformity with the Convention...the phenomenon of child *talibés* remains a concern in practice” and expressed concern at “the use of these children purely for economic purposes.”

The Committee of Experts requested the Government to “take the necessary measures to give effect to the national legislation on begging and to punish *marabouts* who use children for purely economic purposes”. It asked the Government to provide information on “the time-bound measures adopted to prevent young persons under 18 years of age from becoming victims of forced or compulsory labour, such as begging”, and “the effective and time-bound measures adopted to protect these children against forced labour and to ensure their rehabilitation and social integration”.⁶

The Government of Senegal is therefore urged to:

- Ensure the effective application of existing law, particularly the 2005 Law to Combat Trafficking in Persons and Related Practices and to Protect Victims. The legislation must be used to punish those who exploit children in this way with punishments passed that are commensurate with the crime, and are strictly enforced, so as to act as a real deterrent. The Government should publish information about prosecutions brought, sentences passed and punishments imposed.
- Identify *talibés* who are being forced to beg, remove them from harm, and ensure that they are offered rehabilitative care appropriate to their needs.
- Develop strategies to prevent forced child begging that deal with the root causes, including poverty and the lack of access to good quality, affordable state-run education. Measures need to be taken to improve life in the communities of origin, so that children from poor backgrounds can stay at home with their families and receive a more rounded education to equip them better for adult life without being sent out to beg. The Government should target more state support to communities living in areas likely to be vulnerable to this problem, such as drought prone areas in rural Senegal. It should conduct prevention activities among families such as awareness raising about the immediate and long-term risks to children forced to beg. In cases of migrants from other West African countries to *daaras* in Senegal’s urban centres, it is important to work with the countries of origin in these efforts.
- Take action to adapt and regulate the ‘*daara* system.’ Efforts to help *talibés* are likely to be successful only if they recognise widespread respect for *marabouts* and the ‘*daara* system’ within communities. Thus, rather than working to end the

⁶ ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, Individual Observation concerning Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No.182) Senegal, Published 2009.

'*daara* system,' *per se*, the Senegalese NGO Tostan advocates preventing forced child begging by incorporating this system into the state-run education system, through funding and regulating *daaras*, ideally locating them near the children's local communities, and by ensuring that *talibés* are protected from harm and exploitation and receive a broader education by adding additional subjects such as French into the curriculum.

- Provide for training for police and other officials who may come into contact with child beggars on national law relating to forced child begging, child protection issues and the differing experiences of children forced to beg.