

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Karachi, Pakistan  
October 1992**SLAVE TRADE**  
Trafficking of Women and Children in Pakistan

by Carol Rose



Victims of Trafficking

Fatima Mushkali was 12 years old when her widowed mother gave her in marriage to a man almost twice her age. Like many rural Bangladeshis, Fatima's family lacked dowry money to find a more desirable husband for their young daughter. Nor did they have the money to keep her at home.

"Mother wanted us married off and my husband promised to keep me well," says Fatima.

Her "husband" turned out to be a pimp who took Fatima to Pakistan and sold her to another man, a heroin addict who regularly beat her. She had a daughter by this second "husband" and toiled daily in a carpet factory to earn enough to feed herself and the child. But when she heard that the two "husbands" were planning to sell her to a third man, Fatima begged to return to her home in Bangladesh.

"They told me 'No! You won't go'," says Fatima, now 25 years old. "Then they beat me."

After one particularly brutal beating, Fatima sought shelter in the home of a distant Bangladeshi relative in Karachi. That night, her first "husband" arrived with the police. They

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Carol Rose is an ICWA fellow writing on Northwest and South Asia.

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arrested the relative and beat him unconscious. Fatima was taken to a police station and held for interrogation for ten days.

"They kept asking if I had illicit relations with my relative," she explains. "I said no. I told them I ran away because my husband slapped me so hard."

The police then sent Fatima to jail on a charge of zina -- roughly translated as "sex outside of marriage." She languished in prison for two years without visitors, a lawyer or a trial. Thanks to a legal aid organization, Fatima was released on bail two years ago. But she cannot return to Bangladesh until after her trial -- already four years overdue.

"I want to go back home to my family," she says, sitting on a bench in the Karachi courthouse. "I will tell them my story and they will feel so sad."

Fatima is one of an estimated 150 to 200 Bangladeshi girls and women brought to Pakistan each month, lured by false promises of a job or marriage. Once in Karachi, they are sold into prostitution, domestic service, or as farm laborers. As many as 200,000 Bangladeshi women are in Pakistan and the Gulf States as a result of the slave trade.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps as many as 1,400 of them languish in Pakistani prisons on charges of zina (sex outside marriage) or illegal immigration, while not a single pimp or trafficker has been convicted.

## THE NETWORK

Like Fatima, most of the women brought to Pakistan come from poor rural families in Bangladesh, although some come from the Philippines, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Some are kidnapped from their villages, then drugged and brought across the border. But most are sold by their families or simply given away to agents who promise their families to find the girls a good husband or a job in the city.

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<sup>1</sup> A 1991 survey by the National Council for Social Welfare estimated that 150 to 200 women and girls from Bangladesh are trafficked in Pakistan each month. The Pakistan-based Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid estimates that at least 150,000 to 200,000 women are in Pakistan and the Middle East as a result of trafficking. However, both of these are rough estimates. The actual number may be much higher.

Still others set out for Pakistan with their families, including husbands and children. Once they cross the Bangladesh-Indian border, however, agents often beat the husbands or find a way to put them in jail. The women, thus isolated, are taken by the slave traffickers to be sold in Pakistan.



"In the villages the agents offer them money. Sometimes a father sends his daughter away knowing that she will be used as a prostitute," says Baby Maudud, a Dhaka-based Bangladeshi journalist. "But the families are so poor. They can give the girl no clothes, no security, no marriage. They think it is better if she goes outside. Often the pimps promise the girls a job in a factory in Dhaka with lots of money. Most of the girls don't even know where Dhaka is, but go along because many of the pimps are women."

The trafficking of women is partially hidden by the larger migration from Bangladesh to Pakistan of people in need of food and jobs, says Najma Sadeque, a reporter with The News newspaper in Karachi.

"After the [1971 Bangladesh] famine, many families had the problem of what to do with their daughters -- how to get them married off," says Sadeque. "They had to travel 1,500 miles to get to Pakistan. It was not hard to cross by foot, but no one knew the way through India. So, they needed guides. This gave rise to agents who initially were small-time traders and smugglers. They helped people not to get caught, they had food and they knew how to cross the Pakistani border."

In most instances, groups cross the border from Bangladesh to India at Calcutta and then go to Delhi. Somewhere in India, the women are separated from their families.

"In Delhi, the most beautiful and healthy girls are sent to Bombay and the Gulf States," says Maudud. "The other girls are taken through the Punjab, across the border to Lahore [in Pakistan] and then by train to Karachi."

Along the way, many women are raped by Indian and Pakistani border guards, says Zia Awan, president of the Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid in Karachi. "The border police both in India and Pakistan abuse women and some children. They rape the girls, keeping a few of them locked up to abuse until the next batch arrives."

In Karachi, the women are sold for between \$400 to \$4,000, depending on their age, beauty and virginity. Some are forced into permanent prostitution, some are sold as domestic servants or farm laborers. Still others are sold as "wives" to Pakistani



men who cannot afford dowry for a Pakistani bride or to Arab businessmen from the Gulf States who want to expand their harems.

"Men will pay up to 50,000 rupees [\$2,000] for the privilege of deflowering a girl age 11 or 12," says Sadeque. "Older women are sold as domestics and when they have children, the children also become slave labor. Others are used as haris -- serfs, who ... work as slaves to the

feudal landlords.

"The luckiest are those bought by poor peasants who cannot afford a wife," she adds. "At least she is married, has a husband who lives with her and the children, and she is accepted by the community."

In Karachi, most of the slave women are kept in dens in the city slums. At night, they are auctioned off. A Bangladeshi journalist who witnessed the sale described it thus:

"At night, girls were being brought to the slum and [the] auction took place indoors. There was no bidding as such because there was always an understanding between the procurers and the customers before the auction. Usually the younger and more beautiful girls were sold quickly and at higher prices. The unmarried and virgin girls were sold for 15,000 - 20,000 taka [\$450 - \$600]. Also, a group of 10 - 20 girls was sold together for 50,000 to 200,000 [\$1,500 - \$6,000] to brother owners and pimps.."<sup>2</sup>

### Official Sanction

The "mafia" involved in trafficking includes Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis. Border officers, the police and high-ranking government officials from all three countries make money on the sale of women.

Hina Jilani, a leading Human Rights lawyer in Pakistan, says that the agents are "mostly Bangladeshis who earn a living by trafficking, but there also is a lot of official patronage of this sort of thing. The government and police are paid protection money by the traffickers, so they have a vested interest in keeping the business going."

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<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Ali, "Trafficking in Women, Part II," The Weekly Detective (Dhaka, Bangladesh, October 21, 1983), quoted in Double Jeopardy, a report by Asia Watch and the Women's Rights Project of Human Rights Watch.

In addition to accepting bribes, some police make money by retrieving runaway slaves and selling them back to the traffickers. Other officials are more directly involved in the slave trade. In Hyderabad, a city near Karachi, the police were involved in purchasing Bangladeshi girls from agents at the border and then selling them in Karachi. The practice went on for years, until a quarrel developed between the six police officers and the situation received media attention.



Officials at the Bangladeshi High Commission in Islamabad also are involved in helping the traffickers, according to Zia Awan: "The mafia doing this business has penetrated the Bangladeshi embassy," says Awan. "The big pimps we have interviewed say that the pimps go to Dhaka through embassy visas by traveling by air, then return over the border by foot with the women."

Corrupt police and government officials are not the only ones to blame for the trafficking of women in Pakistan. Equally at fault is the Pakistani legal system itself -- a system that imprisons victimized women instead of protecting them.

"When the victims are recovered, the police don't know how to deal with them because the police themselves are involved with the criminals," says Awan. "So, they make the victims into the accused and then the state victimizes them more in jail."

### **Hudood Ordinance and the Victimization of Women in Pakistan**

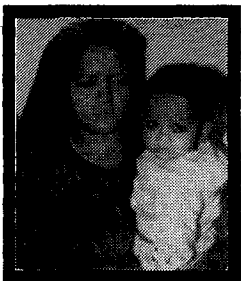
In 1979, the government of Pakistan passed the Hudood Ordinance, a set of so-called "Islamic" laws that criminalize a variety of acts, including adultery, fornication and rape -- collectively known as zina, or sex outside of marriage. The ordinance proscribes punishments that include imprisonment, flogging and stoning to death.<sup>4</sup>

Under the Hudood Ordinance, maximum punishment for rape -- stoning to death -- requires testimony from four male witnesses. The testimony of women, including the victim, is not admissible in court. While a woman's testimony is accepted for the lesser punishment of flogging, courts in Pakistan assume that all rape

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<sup>3</sup> Nafisa Hoodbhoy, "Sold, Raped and Tortured," in Dawn (Karachi, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Asia Watch report, op cit.



is consensual sex unless the woman has overwhelming proof of forced intercourse.

Those who allege but are unable to prove rape charges are themselves open to the charge of zina -- or sex outside of marriage. As a result, women can be imprisoned for zina based on their own testimony that they have been raped. Moreover, if a medical examination following rape proves that intercourse took place, that evidence can be used against the woman to imprison her under the zina law.

"Our law says that you cannot draw people into making a statement against themselves, but under this zina law it happens because they use medical evidence taken from the women to convict the women," says Jilani. "There are serious legal connotations behind having this kind of law on the books."

Statistics illustrate how the Hudood laws have affected the female population of Pakistan. Prior to 1979, there were only 70 women in the criminal justice system in Pakistan. Today, there are over 6,000, more than half imprisoned under the Hudood laws, particularly zina.

For Bangladeshi women illegally brought to Pakistan, zina has particularly serious repercussions. The law enables traffickers and pimps to enslave a woman by threatening to imprison her for "sex outside of marriage" if she tries to run away. Sher Khan, the most notorious pimp in Pakistan, hides behind the zina ordinance by arranging Islamic "marriages" between the slave women and their buyers. He hires a religious leader -- or maulvi -- to perform the ceremony, while collecting payment for himself under the disguise of dowry.

"I assist in the arrangements of a girl's marriage," says Sher Khan. "It is a good deed. I collect the money from the bridegroom's parents and pay it to the girls parents..."<sup>5</sup>

Because Islamic law allows a man to marry up to four wives, it is possible for married men to be "married" again to the women they buy as slaves. If the women attempt to escape, their "husbands" can put them in jail simply by accusing them of zina.

Once a woman is in prison, she may stay there for years without a trial. Imprisoned and far from home, Bangladeshi women

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<sup>5</sup> Zulqarnain Shahid and Bushra Jabbar Khan, "Slave Trade!" in MAG, August 16 - 22, 1990.

### How Zina Laws Imprison Women

Pakistan's Zina law -- forbidding "sex outside of marriage" -- is used to imprison innocent Pakistani women, as well as their sisters from Bangladesh. Sometimes men use the zina law to imprison women because they have debts to pay off, there is a family fight, or simply out of spite. Here are stories from some of the Pakistani women with whom I talked:

Rafat Iqbal, age 23, was imprisoned for two years, after her father charged her with zina. Rafat had married a man of her own choosing, thereby rejecting the man her father had wanted her to marry. Her father told police that Rafat was married twice, thereby committing adultery. After waiting in prison two years for a trial -- during which time she gave birth to a daughter -- Rafat was acquitted when she presented the judge with her legitimate marriage certificate.

Nasareen Hussain was 15 years old when her mother arranged for her to marry a man. But Nasareen's father, who lived with his second wife, had wanted Nasareen to marry someone else. Enraged at Nasareen's mother, her father charged Nasareen with zina, saying the girl was previously married to the fiance he had chosen. Now 23 years old, Nasareen spent two years in prison before being released on bail. She still awaits a trial.

Shamim Ayaz, age 30, was accused of zina by her husband. He owed \$400 to a neighbor, a debt which he could not pay off. Rather than work to pay back the debt, the husband accused Shamim and the neighbor of having illicit relations. This charge put both Shamim and the neighbor in jail and gave husband a reprieve from his debt.

find their only hope for freedom lies in cooperating with the pimps.

"In jail, the girls have no parents, no lawyers, no visitors other than the pimps," says Awan. "The pimps have complete access in jail, so they try to convince them to return to an immoral life. Seventy percent have joined the pimps again."

Moreover, bail is set usually between \$1,000 and \$2,000, a price that only the pimps can afford to pay. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has petitioned the Supreme Court to lower the bail set for women charged under the Hudood ordinance, but so far nothing has been done.

Occasionally, women choose to stay in jail rather than be released to the pimps. Anwara, age 15, and Sharifa, age 16, have been in the Karachi Central Jail for 20 months awaiting trial under the Hudood Ordinance. These two village girls from

Bangladesh, who don't have last names, were arrested with three other women during a raid on the house of the slave trader, Sher Khan. The other three women arrested agreed to accept bail from Sher Khan -- who himself was released on bail -- but Sharifa and Anwara chose to remain behind bars rather than go with the pimp.

I waited for four hours one day to meet with Sharifa and Anwara, who were scheduled to make an appearance at the Karachi court house. Unfortunately, the police van that was supposed to bring them from the jail to the courthouse never arrived. Such delays are typical in the Pakistani court system. As a result of this delay, Sharifa and Anwara will remain in jail for at least two more months before their case again comes to court.

Talking with the lawyer, Zia Awan, I was able to piece together their story. Both girls say they were brought to Pakistan from Bangladesh in February 1991. Anwara says she was "shown" to three people and that she was to be sold to a 55-year-old man the night that police raided the house.

"Instead of being made witnesses [against Sher Khan], these minor girls, who are victims of the flesh trade, were booked as



**Breaking the chains:** Lawyer Aftab Bano Rajput (left) has helped to win the release from jail of Rafat Iqbal, a Pakistani, (center) and Fatima Mushkali, a Bangladeshi (right). Both women were charged with Zina.



accused by the police," says Awan. "The girls refused to come out on bail to the pimp, so both girls are in jail while the pimps go free. But I don't know how long they will be willing to stay in prison. Eventually, they will also decide to compromise with the pimps."



Because Sharifa and Anwara are Bangladeshis, they face additional imprisonment because they are in Pakistan illegally.

"Those acquitted of zina then have to face charges of illegal entry, which carries a sentence of eight to nine months," says Jilani. "But they cannot be released even after serving these sentences, because the minute you step outside of the prison you recommit the crime of 'illegal' presence in Pakistan. As a result, many Bangladeshis become civil internees and will remain in prison until they are deported, which may be never."

Not surprisingly, conditions in the prison are terrible. Women I spoke with said they sleep on the floor. The food is infested with worms and insects. There is little access to medical care. Many women give birth while in jail, others are raising their children in the prison.

"If you get in a fight in the jail then the wardens hit you, put you in a dark room and don't give you food for two days," says Fatima. "We spend most of the day sweeping, cleaning and watering plants."

Sabiha Sumar runs the "Center for Social Science Research," which offers bail and legal protection to women charged under the zina ordinance, including Fatima.

"If you read the judgements under these [zina] laws, you will realize how stupid it really is," she says. "There are children in the jail who are eight years old, who were born there. It is so tiring and it has been going on for so long. I don't think it will change in my lifetime."

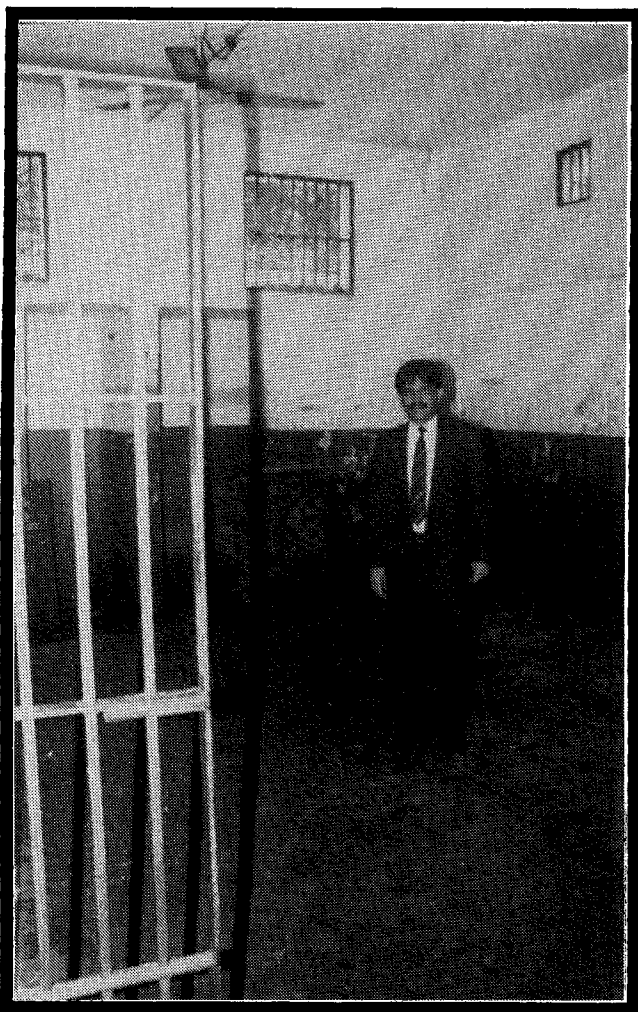
## **BREAKING THE CHAINS**

Despite widespread publicity about the slave trade in Pakistan, the problem may actually be getting worse.

"The number of women in prison has gone down because of the publicity, but the problem has not gone away," says Jilani. "The noise raised by the media and human rights groups has pushed the trafficking underground -- where it is more dangerous for the women."

Jilani and others say the women are no longer kept in large dens around Karachi, but instead are separated into small groups and locked up at various hostels to prevent detection. Moreover, the pimps are getting more sophisticated, arranging "marriages" between the women and buyers and issuing false identity cards to the women.

Foreign media coverage has increased awareness of the problem, but it also has made more difficult attempts to monitor the situation. For example, following a National Public Radio broadcast in 1990, in which Bangladeshi women were interviewed from inside the Karachi jail, foreign journalists and human rights workers were barred from entering the jail to check on conditions there.



Zia Awan, a lawyer who represents many Bangladeshi women imprisoned in Pakistan, stands in the lock-up of the Karachi courthouse where the women are held.

A BBC film crew making a television program about trafficking last year was assisted by a man named Shafi Mohammad, who led the BBC to the leading traffickers so that they could film a police raid on one of the brothels. After the BBC left, Shafi Mohammad was arrested and charged with trafficking. He remains in prison, unable to afford bail. Zia Awan, who also assisted the BBC, says he has written repeatedly to the BBC producer requesting assistance in the release of Shafi Mohammad, but has received no reply from London.

Non-governmental agencies working to help women imprisoned under the Hudood ordinance also face increasing harassment by the Pakistani police and intelligence agencies. Awan says his group has been harassed and that he has been personally threatened by pimps who resent his interference in their business.

Sumar says her organization has "come under threats and intimidation from fundamentalists and the government agencies: "Federal investigators have interrogated us, asking: Why are we against Hudood?"

Despite these attempts at intimidation, Pakistani human rights activists are trying to stop the trafficking. Abdul Sattar Edhi, a well-known Pakistan philanthropist, has offered to raise money to pay the air fare for any Bangladeshi woman who wants to return. So far, only 10 women have been repatriated, all in 1987. Generally, the government of Bangladesh refuses to issue travel documents on the grounds that it has no proof the women are Bangladeshi citizens.



Governments in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India are aware of the problem: a Cartoon from a Dhaka newspaper.

Even if the women return to Bangladesh, they may face difficulties returning to their villages and families.

"I don't think they will be easily accepted if they return," says Jebunessa Lily, a Bangladeshi woman working in Dhaka for CARE International. "It is difficult even for a widow here, or for a divorced woman. But for a woman who is kidnapped, when she goes home she will be rejected not only by her neighbors, but by her entire family. And if the news is leaked out that she has been raped, she will certainly be thrown out of her house."

Changing local attitudes about women is necessary if repatriation programs are to work. But stopping the slave traffick in the first place will require international pressure on the governments of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.



Pakistan and Bangladesh both are signatories to the anti-Slavery Convention and the 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Any Practices Similar to Slavery. These and other international agreements signed by Pakistan and Bangladesh require states to "adopt or maintain such measures as required...to check the traffic in persons...for the purposes of prostitution."<sup>6</sup>

Under these same conventions, states agree to repatriate victims of international trafficking -- but only "after agreement is reached with the state of destination."<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, laws alone won't suffice. Government officials also must take steps to enforce those laws.

"All the governments are aware of the problem," says Jilani. "But Bangladesh has acute problems with unemployment and cannot, or does not want to, close its border to India. Repatriation is also a problem because the Bangladeshi High Commission does not respond."

The Pakistani government is equally reluctant to take responsibility for the trafficking. In a recent speech before the Asia Society, Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States, Abida Hussain, stated:

"When a woman whose family has been left behind in Bangladesh arrives in Pakistan, what happens to her may not be very kind, but I am not aware of any organized trafficking going on."<sup>8</sup>

Despite such denials, officials from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh met under the auspices of the Commonwealth last July in an effort to address the problem of slave trafficking. Although no action was taken at the meeting, it was a first step toward admitting that the problem exists and requires a regional solution.

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<sup>6</sup> Convention for the Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, Article 17, quoted in "Double Jeopardy," op.cit. p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Address to the Asia Society, February 1992, quoted in "Double Jeopardy," Ibid.

### Camel Kids for Sale

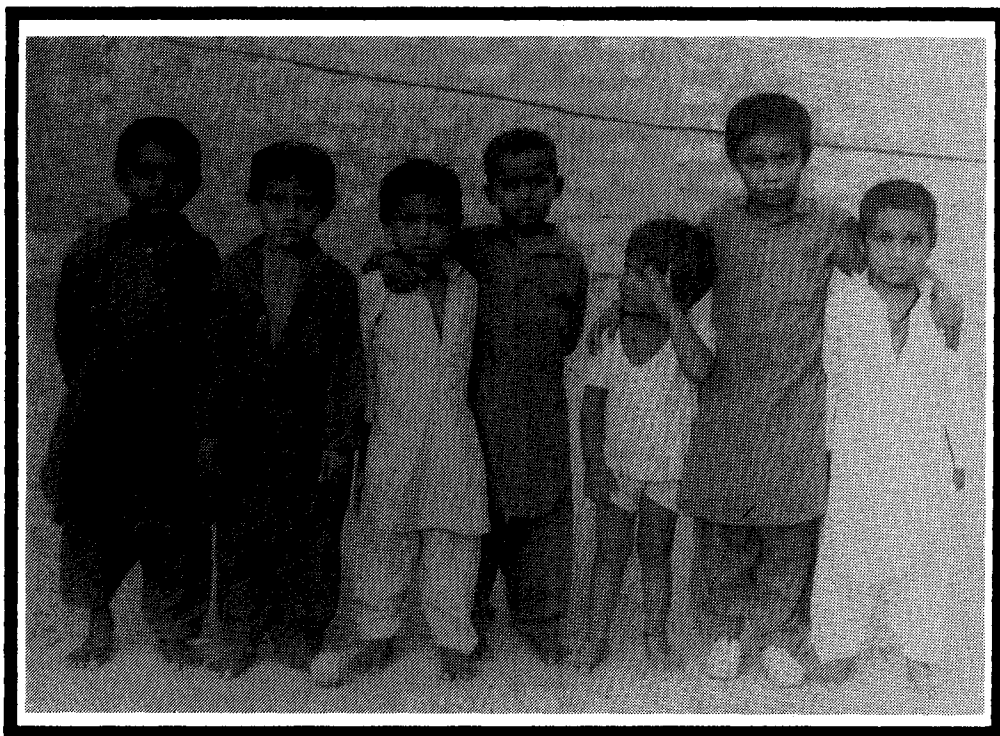
Women are not the only slaves sold in Pakistan. Boys between the ages of two and six also are being illegally smuggled from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh to the Gulf States to be used as camel jockeys and as organ donors. Most come from impoverished rural areas and are sold in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Amman, Sharjah, Dubai and Bahrain. Zia Awan, of the Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid, is spearheading the effort in Pakistan to stop the trade.

"In some cases, the parents actually pay money [\$1,000] to the pimps to take the children because they are promised a return on their investment within one month," says Awan. "The kids are put in a rope cage on back of the camel. When the camel starts racing, the child screams, which makes the camel go faster. When the camels fall down, the children often are injured or die."

Camel racing is big business in the Sheikdoms of the Gulf region, where prizes are in the thousands of dollars. But the children don't get the money. Their "owners" do. Moreover, most of the children are used as jockeys only until they are too big -- around 88 pounds or nine years old. After that, says Awan, some of the children become care-takers for the camels. Others are sold so that their organs can be harvested for transplant. No one knows for certain how many boys are being sold for camel racing or organ transplants each year, but most everyone agrees they number in the thousands.

"I think the United Nations should take up this issue," says Awan. "Just having oil does not give these rulers the right to do inhuman activities."

"We need a joint commission of the three countries that, in combination with the United Nations, will pressure the governments to stop the flesh trade," says Zia Awan. "If there is a will, then a way will be found. But too many officials are involved, too many interests are at stake. At this time, I see no will."



Pakistani boys rescued as they were being shipped to the Gulf to be sold as "camel kids."

Photos provided by Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid

