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Reuters

Afghan child labor fears grow as aid dries up

By Amie Ferris-Rotman

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KABUL - Dwindling development aid as the war winds down in Afghanistan means child labor in the impoverished country is at risk of becoming more widespread, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) warned on Tuesday.



Half of Afghanistan's population of 30 million are under 15, with almost two million children in full or part-time work, UNICEF estimates of a country where war, poverty, unemployment and

pride in having large families have created a huge underage labor market.

With foreign troops fighting Taliban insurgents pulling out by the end of 2014, global attention is dolefully shifting away from Afghanistan and its humanitarian needs, said the ILO's representative to Kabul Herve Berger.

"The issue of child labor may fall below the radar screen and be seen as less important after 2014," Berger told Reuters. "What is key here is ensuring enough sustainability."

Berger cited a report by the UN agency detailing one of the worst forms of child labor -- brickmaking in the dusty kilns in the country's east, where children work in a slavish cycle of debt that is almost impossible to escape.

Though both child labor and so-called bonded work are illegal in Afghanistan, children as young as five churn out hundreds of bricks a week for a few dollars to pay off family debts which swell the longer they work there.

Poor health from harsh working conditions, reliance on shelter and electricity provided by brick employers and denied education mean brickmakers are tied to their work.

With Afghanistan's construction boom -- a third of which is supported by foreign aid -- expected to dampen as aid dries up, brick demand will slump and the children will be forced further into poverty as the balance tips in favor of the employers.

This mirrors what could happen to Afghanistan on a larger scale when the aid vanishes, a process which has already started.

"All service sectors will be affected as aid dries up. Lower profit margins mean more children will be working," said Sarah Cramer, project manager at Samuel Hall Consulting, which conducted the study for the ILO.

Civilian aid, the vast majority coming from the United States, peaked in 2010 in Afghanistan and Washington has said it will spend less on development as it withdraws troops.

U.S. economic and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan fell from \$4.1 billion in 2010 to \$2.5 billion in 2011. The UN World Food Programme only managed to raise half of its Afghan budget last year as donors cut back as global economic woes mounted.

U.S. aid will be even lower this year as Washington shifts to sustainability projects, which they say require lower levels of funding.

Ensuring sustainability is one of the key concerns to be voiced at the major Afghanistan conferences in Chicago in May and Tokyo in July, Berger said.

He said that despite Afghanistan's pledge last year to set a minimum age for coal mine workers at 18, the country must be vigorous in eradicating child labor when exploring its untapped mineral deposits, plans which are already unfolding in the face of disappearing aid.