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Let Them Sweat

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

ATTOCK, Pakistan — When the G-8 leaders meet this week, cowering in a Canadian mountain resort beyond the reach of organized anarchists, here's a way for them to bolster terror-infested third world countries like Pakistan.

They should start an international campaign to promote imports from sweatshops, perhaps with bold labels depicting an unrecognizable flag and the words "Proudly Made in a Third World Sweatshop!"

The Gentle Reader will think I've been smoking Pakistani opium. But the fact is that sweatshops are the only hope of kids like Ahmed Zia, a 14-year-old boy here in Attock, a gritty center for carpet weaving.

Ahmed, who dropped out of school in the second grade, earns \$2 a day hunched over the loom, laboring over a rug that will adorn some American's living room. It is a pittance, but the American campaign against sweatshops could make his life much more wretched by inadvertently encouraging mechanization that could cost him his job.

"Carpet-making is much better than farm work," Ahmed said, mulling alternatives if he loses his job as hundreds of others have over the last year. "This makes much more money and is more comfortable."

Indeed, talk to third world factory workers and the whole idea of "sweatshops" seems a misnomer. It is farmers and brick-makers who really sweat under the broiling sun, while sweatshop workers merely glow.

The third world is already battered by heartless conservatives in the West who peddle arms and cigarettes or who (like the Bushies) block \$34 million desperately needed for maternal and infant health by the United Nations Population Fund. So it's catastrophic for muddle-minded liberals to join in and cudgel impoverished workers for whom a sweatshop job is the first step on life's escalator.

By this point, I've offended every possible reader. But before you spurn a shirt made by someone like 8-year-old Kamis Saboor, an Afghan refugee whose father is dead and who is the sole breadwinner in the family, answer this question: How does shunning sweatshop products help Kamis? All the alternatives for him are worse.

"I dream of a job in a factory," said Noroz Khan, who lives on a garbage dump and spends his days searching for metal that he can sell to recyclers. He earns about \$1.40 a day, and children

earn just 30 cents a day for scrounging barefoot in the filth — a few feet away from us, birds were pecking at the bloated carcass of a cow, its feet in the air.

Of course, Western anti-sweatshop activists mean well and aim only for improved conditions and a "living wage." But the reality is that the bad publicity becomes one more headache for companies considering operating in international hellholes (where the only lure is wages so low that it would be embarrassing if journalists started asking questions about them), and so manufacturers opt to mechanize their operations and operate in somewhat more developed countries.

For example, Nike has 35 contract factories in Taiwan, 49 in South Korea, only 3 in Pakistan and none at all in Afghanistan — if it did, critics would immediately fulminate about low wages, glue vapors, the mistreatment of women.

But the losers are the Afghans, and especially Afghan women. The country is full of starving widows who can find no jobs. If Nike hired them at 10 cents an hour to fill all-female sweatshops, they and their country would be hugely better off.

Nike used to have two contract factories in impoverished Cambodia, among the neediest countries in the world. Then there was an outcry after BBC reported that three girls in one factory were under 15 years old. So Nike fled controversy by ceasing production in Cambodia.

The result was that some of the 2,000 Cambodians (90 percent of them young women) who worked in those factories faced layoffs. Some who lost their jobs probably were ensnared in Cambodia's huge sex slave industry — which leaves many girls dead of AIDS by the end of their teenage years.

The G-8 leaders will never dare, of course, begin a pro-sweatshop campaign. But at a summit that will discuss how to bring stability and economic growth to some of the world's poorest nations, it would be a start if Westerners who denounce sweatshops would think less of feel-good measures for themselves and more about how any of this helps people like Ahmed and Kamis.