

How your chocolate may be tainted

By Sudarsan Raghavan and Sumana Chatterjee

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DALOA, Ivory Coast - There may be a hidden ingredient in the chocolate cake you baked, the candy bars your children sold for their school fund-raiser or that fudge ripple ice cream cone you enjoyed on Saturday afternoon.

Slave labor.

Forty-three percent of the world's cocoa beans, the raw material in chocolate, come from small, scattered farms in this poor West African country. And on some of the farms, the hot, hard work of clearing the fields and harvesting the fruit is done by boys who were sold or tricked into slavery. Most of them are between the ages of 12 and 16. Some are as young as 9.

The lucky slaves live on corn paste and bananas. The unlucky ones are whipped, beaten and broken like horses to harvest the almond-sized beans that are made into chocolate treats for more fortunate children in Europe and America.

Aly Diabate was almost 12 when a slave trader promised him a bicycle and \$150 a year to help support his poor parents in Mali. He worked for a year and a half for a cocoa farmer who is known as "Le Gros" ("the Big Man"), but he said his only rewards were the rare days when Le Gros' overseers or older slaves didn't flog him with a bicycle chain or branches from a cacao tree.

Cocoa beans come from pods on the cacao tree. To get the 400 or so beans it takes to make a pound of chocolate, the boys who work on Ivory Coast's cocoa farms cut 10 pods from the trees, slice them open, scoop out the beans, spread them in baskets or on mats and cover them to ferment. Then they uncover the beans, put them in the sun to dry, bag them and load them onto trucks to begin the long journey to America or Europe.

Aly said he doesn't know what the beans from the cacao tree taste like after they've been processed and blended with sugar, milk and other ingredients. That happens far away from the farm where he worked, in places such as Hershey, Pa., Milwaukee and San Francisco.

"I don't know what chocolate is," said Aly.

Americans spend \$13 billion a year on chocolate, but most of them are as ignorant of where it comes from as the boys who harvest cocoa beans are about where their beans go.

More cocoa beans come from Ivory Coast than from anyplace else in the world. The country's beans are prized for their quality and abundance, and in the first three months of this year, more than 47,300 tons of them were shipped to the United States through Philadelphia and Brooklyn, N.Y., according to the Port Import Export Reporting Service. At other times of the year, Ivory Coast cocoa beans are delivered to Camden, N.J., Norfolk, Va., and San Francisco.

From the ports, the beans are shipped to cocoa processors. America's biggest are ADM Cocoa in Milwaukee, a subsidiary of Decatur, Ill.-based Archer Daniels Midland; Barry Callebaut, which has its headquarters in Zurich, Switzerland; Minneapolis-based Cargill; and Nestle USA of Glendale, Calif., a subsidiary of the Swiss food giant.

But by the time the beans reach the processors, those picked by slaves and those harvested by free field hands have been jumbled together in warehouses, ships, trucks and rail cars. By the time they reach consumers in America or Europe, free beans and slave beans are so thoroughly blended that there is no way to know which chocolate products taste of slavery and which do not.

However, even the Chocolate Manufacturers Association, a trade group for American chocolate makers, acknowledges that slaves are harvesting cocoa on some Ivory Coast farms.

A 1998 report from UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, concluded that some Ivory Coast farmers use enslaved children, many of them from the poorer neighboring countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin and Togo. A report by the Geneva, Switzerland-based International Labor Organization, released June 15, found that trafficking in children is widespread in West Africa.

The State Department's year 2000 human rights report concluded that some 15,000 children between the ages of 9 and 12 have been sold into forced labor on cotton, coffee and cocoa plantations in northern Ivory Coast in recent years.

Aly Diabate and 18 other boys labored on a 494-acre farm, very large by Ivory Coast standards, in the southwestern part of the country. Their days began when the sun rose, which at this time of year in Ivory Coast is a few minutes after 6 a.m. They finished work about 6:30 in the evening, just before nightfall, when fireflies were beginning to illuminate the velvety night like Christmas lights. They trudged home to a dinner of burned bananas. If they were lucky, they were treated to yams seasoned with saltwater "gravy."

After dinner, the boys were ordered into a 24-by-20-foot room, where they slept on wooden planks without mattresses. The only window was covered with hardened mud except for a baseball-size hole to let some air in.

"Once we entered the room, nobody was allowed to go out," said Mamadou Traore, a thin, frail youth with serious brown eyes who is 19 now. "Le Gros gave us cans to urinate. He locked the door and kept the key."

"We didn't cry, we didn't scream," said Aly (pronounced AL-ee). "We thought we had been sold, but we weren't sure."

The boys became sure one day when Le Gros walked up to Mamadou and ordered him to work harder. "I bought each of you for 25,000 francs (about \$35)," the farmer said, according to Mamadou (MAH-mah-doo). "So you have to work harder to reimburse me."

Aly was barely 4 feet tall when he was sold into slavery, and he had a hard time carrying the heavy bags of cocoa beans.

"Some of the bags were taller than me," he said. "It took two people to put the bag on my head. And when you didn't hurry, you were beaten."

He was beaten more than the other boys were. You can still see the faint scars on his back, right shoulder and left arm.

"They said he wasn't working very hard," said Mamadou.

"The beatings were a part of my life," Aly said. "Anytime they loaded you with bags and you fell while carrying them, nobody helped you. Instead, they beat you and beat you until you picked it up again."

At night, Aly had nightmares about working forever in the fields, about dying and nobody noticing. To drown them out, he replayed his memories of growing up in Mali, over and over again

"I was always thinking about my parents and how I could get back to my country," he said.

But he didn't think about trying to escape.

"I was afraid," he said, his voice as faint as the scars on his skinny body. "I had seen others who tried to escape. When they tried they were severely beaten."

Le Gros (Leh GROW), whose name is Lenikpo Yeo, denied that he paid for the boys who worked for him, although Ivory Coast farmers often pay a finder's fee to someone who delivers workers to them. He also denied that the boys were underfed, locked up at night or forced to work more than 12 hours a day without breaks. He said they were treated well, and that he paid for their medical treatment.

"When I go hunting, when get a kill, I divide it in half — one for my family and the other for them. Even if I kill a gazelle, the workers come and share it."

He denied beating any of the boys.

"I've never, ever laid hands on any one of my workers," Le Gros said. "Maybe I called them bad words if I was angry. That's the worst I did."

Le Gros said a Malian overseer beat one boy who had run away, but he said he himself did not order any beatings.

A taste of slavery: Two boys, two years, no pay

By Sudarsan Raghavan

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OUROUTA, Ivory Coast - Brahima Male and Siaka Traure met two years ago in the little bus station in Sikasso, Mali, where slave traders wait.

Siaka was 14 and Brahima was just turning 12, and Siaka packed his nice olive green shirt because he thought he was going to have "a good time" in Ivory Coast.

A "locateur" offered them work as welders or carpenters. Neither boy had any experience at those trades, but the locateur said his "big brother" in Ivory Coast would pay them each about \$170 a year, 120,000 African Financial Community francs.

He offered to take them there for free.

The two boys were taken to wait in a warehouse near the bus station for a few hours. More boys came, until there were 15. Then they drove off in two white mini-buses with two men in each vehicle.

"The locateur told us that if we were stopped by police, we should tell them that he was our elder brother," said Siaka (pronounced See-AH-ka).

When they neared the border, the boys were ordered to get out and take motorcycle taxis. They continued on a back road and slipped into Ivory Coast undetected. The taxis took them to a nearby village, where the w "I was suspicious, but I was also scared," said Brahima (Bruh-HEE-muh). "We were already across and I didn't know how I could run away. I had no money."

Dote Coulibaly was waiting in Korhogo. He needed two boys to work on his cocoa and coffee farm.

Coulibaly (COO-lee-baa-lee) said he bought Brahima and Siaka for \$28 each, but the boys said he paid that much for both of them. Whatever the price, two days later they found themselves on his farm.

"When we arrived, he had not told us the whole story," said Brahima. "He told us we would work only in the cocoa and coffee fields. But there were also cotton, yam, corn and rice fields. When you finish one field, you go to another and another."

Nearly half of the world's cocoa beans come from Ivory Coast farms, some of which use boys like Brahima and Siaka who were sold or tricked into slavery to do the harvesting.

Brahima is a tall, thin boy with muscular arms and a cherubic face. He has been enslaved on Coulibaly's farm nearly two years. He shares a windowless mud hut with Siaka, and he doesn't ask much from life. He just wants to leave.

But he seldom thinks of trying to escape. When Siaka tried to flee last year, Coulibaly beat him, Siaka said.

"He tied me behind my back with rope and beat me with a piece of wood," said Siaka, peeling back his shirt to show the scars on his left shoulder and arm. "Then he took a small gun, and said, 'I'm going to kill you and dump you in a well.' "

Coulibaly denied that he beat Siaka. But he didn't apologize for intimidating and bullying Siaka and Brahim into submission.

After all, he said, he paid \$28 each for them.

"If I let them go, I'm losing money, because I spent money for them," explained Coulibaly, 39, wearing grimy khaki pants and holding a machete. "It will hurt me to lose them. So when I have the feeling that a person is trying to run away, I find that person and ask them why they want to leave."

"One day, Siaka tried to run away," he continued. "I sat him down and said, 'If you really don't want to work, you give me my money and I'll let you go.' Siaka said, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' But I kept telling him. Then I said, 'You know I spent money on you. If you try to escape, I'll catch you and beat you.' After that, we were on better terms. He's never been impolite to me since then. . . . I just frightened him."

Coulibaly flashed a toothy smile and shrugged, as if he expected his visitors to understand.

He feeds the two boys adequately, and he gave them \$18 each to celebrate two Muslim holidays. They used the money to buy sandals and soap.

But when their year was up last September, he told them that two of his relatives had died and he had had to pay for their funerals and other expenses. So could the boys please wait until January to be paid?

When January came, Coulibaly said he would pay them at the end of this year. But he admits he may have a hard time raising the \$680 he owes them for two years' work. Last year, he made only \$570, and the economy is getting worse.

"These days you cannot make predictions anymore," said Coulibaly.

He doesn't watch the boys as closely now. Since he owes them money, he knows they won't run away.

"If you leave, you are the loser and he'll be happy," said Brahim, his voice fading in the rustle of the wind.

So Siaka and Brahim never venture very far from their master's farm.

"Daloa is Paris to us," said Brahim, as he sat beside a big red termite hill and watched Siaka work in the olive green shirt he had brought for the good times in Ivory Coast. It is in tatters.