

text **antonella gambotto-burke** photography **antonella gambotto-burke & getty images**

# Suffer The Little Children

Activist and author Raymond Bechard shares the grim tale of child slavery and exploitation of labour around the world and right here in our own backyard



**LAST NIGHT,** Raymond Bechard finished work early: at 2am, he fell asleep with the cellphone on the bed. "It's gotten to the point where I don't measure sleep in terms of the last 24 hours," he says, "it's how much sleep I've gotten in the past two days. If I can get everything done by 6am, then I can get two hours of sleep on the plane. I spread it out."

He is preparing to leave for Iraq. The author of *Unspeakable: The Hidden Truth Behind the World's Fastest Growing Crime* (Compel), Bechard, 46, is also the director of Ahava Kids, a nonprofit organization that facilitates the rescue of children from trafficking, enslavement and exploitation. The situation in Iraq is changing every day, he explains, and trafficking is not exactly the Iraqi government's priority. Just this morning he was in touch with the US Army colonel arranging his travel and security, a man shocked by footage of Iraqi orphanages discovered by US troops. One orphanage had been abandoned by the caretakers, and its 50 or so children were near death.

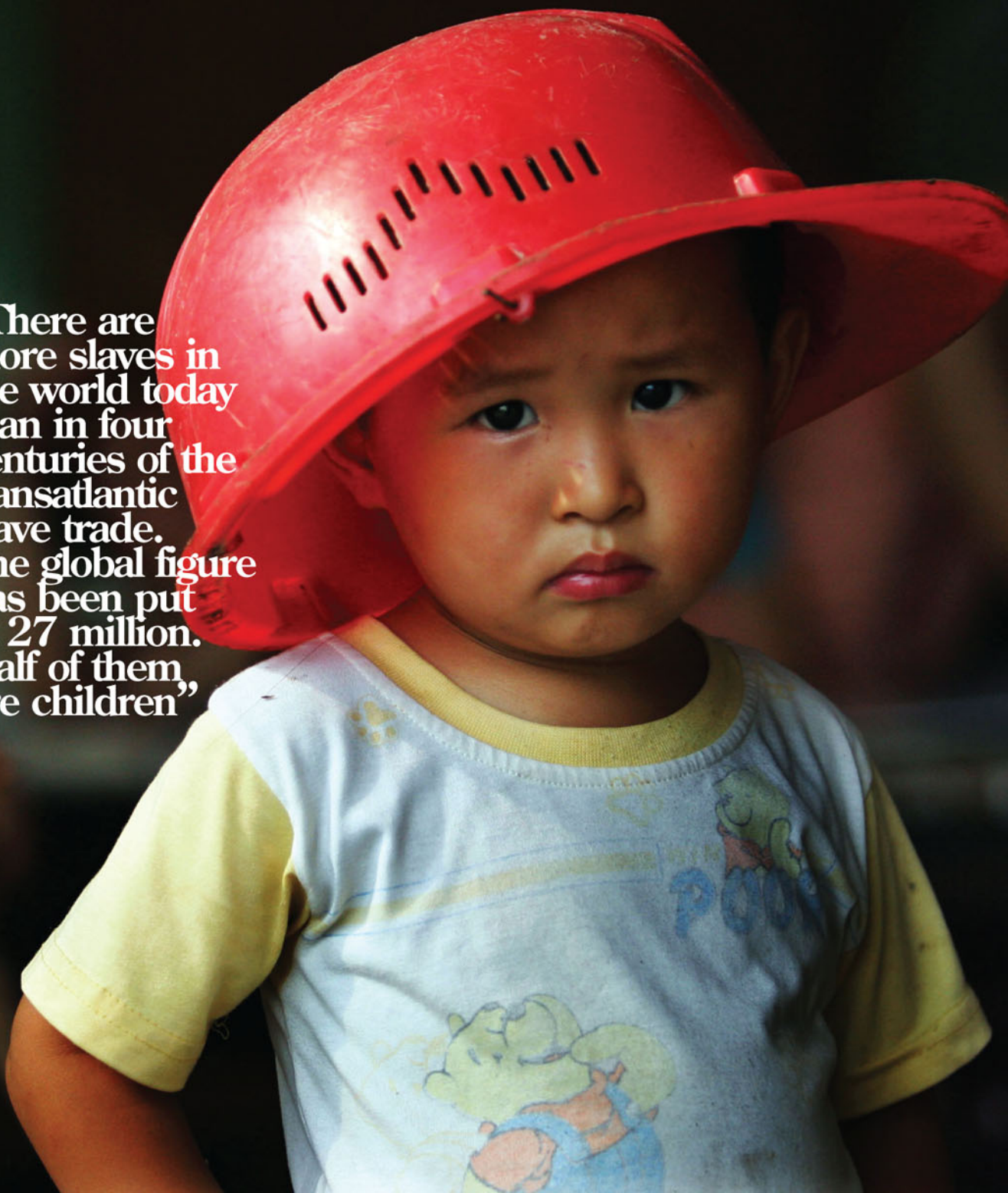
"Trafficking occurs wherever extreme poverty, political chaos, or warfare exist," Bechard says. "Find any one and you will find trafficking. Iraq has all three. With Saudi Arabia—a Tier 3 country; the worst designation for trafficking violations—bordering Iraq, there is a large criminal element transporting young people for profit there. Over the past four years, millions have been forced from their homes in Iraq. Untold thousands killed. Families separated. Thousands of children have been lost or disenfranchised. They are wandering, hiding, trying to eat and survive. Eventually, they will become so desperate that they will do anything or go with anyone, clutching at a chance to get out. Traffickers see them as fruit that is ripe for the picking. We have to stop them."

There are more slaves in the world today than in four centuries of the transatlantic slave trade. The global figure has been put at 27 million. Half of them are children. Of the many in the sex trade, almost all of those under a certain age—one, say, or two—die after being raped by adult males; some of them are widened for easier access with knives.

All operate outside even the most rudimentary labour laws. The work they do is uniformly 3D:

Crippling sanctions force Myanmar children to work to help their families survive.

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Sex workers, some very young, at the Czech-German border awaiting clients.

dirty, dangerous, difficult. Pakistani debt-bondage brick-making kilns, Cote d'Ivoire cocoa plantations, Nepalese rug-loom sheds, the camel races of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar, the sweatshops, sex clubs, and organized begging groups of the United States and Europe, domestic servitude in the wealthiest homes in the wealthiest cities, and in illegal brothels everywhere.

They are, to those who feel nothing, the perfect employees. No unions, no demands, no recourses. All monies earned go straight to criminals. The only time these children play is when the electricity fails. Three quarters of them risk death on a daily basis—in mines and primitive factories, with chemicals and agricultural pesticides, at the hands of violent and diseased sex tourists and sociopathic owners. They survive without adequate nutrition or healthcare, family or friends, hygiene or education, future or hope. The few who outlive their sexual usefulness are used in some form of forced labour.

These children are without protection: disposable. After a promise made to an AIDS-ravaged child victim of trafficking in a Haitian orphanage, Bechard formed Ahava Kids with \$5000 and four employees in 2002; in 2004, it became a legal entity and now has charity status. From the outset, his vision was clear: the organization would never be swamped by bureaucracy, unnecessary expenses or conflicting priorities. His Connecticut offices are the perfect base of operations: they are well hidden, and within range of several airports for immediate travel.

He flies wherever he is needed. Some of the children he rescues are literally kept in cages. Most live in crowded, filthy conditions. They are starved in order to stunt their growth: the smaller and thinner they are, the more they are worth. Deliberately addicted to drugs by their keepers, whatever appetite they had is destroyed. The less spent on them, the higher the profit margin. If a girl becomes pregnant, her baby is brought to term only to be sold on the illegal adoption market or for its organs. In the event of abortion, the standard of the procedure is entirely dependent on the girl's value to the brothel: if she attracts

## used & abused

money, she will receive proper treatment; if she doesn't, then she is in danger.

Raids and rescue require swift organization because trafficked children are regularly relocated so as to escape detection. "It's easy to lose track of them," Bechard says, "which means you lose them entirely. The real work begins when the child is in the care of those who want to save her life instead of end it. Planning for trafficking victims' long-term care is far more difficult and expensive. Sometimes it requires years of care. Often, we have to prepare for children with drug addiction, HIV/AIDS, severe emotional trauma, and horrible physical damage. Sometimes the best we can do is hospice care."

Ahava's potent four-step procedure of raids, rescue, relocation and rehabilitation is funded by individuals. As awareness increases, more people become involved, which is why Bechard began writing *Unspeakable*. He feels it was the least he could do.

"The available material was almost exclusively sensationalistic—ineffective in terms of informing

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A criminal convicted of abducting and selling children burst into tears upon receiving the death penalty in China.

While these Iraqi children celebrated the execution of Saddam Hussein, other Iraqi children are increasingly at the mercy of traffickers since the invasion that toppled him.



**“Legislative reform is imperative. Nations must be made accountable for what happens to children within their borders and for what their citizens do elsewhere”**

the public,” Bechard muses. “I wanted to provide an overview that would educate and motivate readers. The research took months. I rescheduled everything else in my life. I had to walk in the shadows while not allowing myself to be controlled by them. It’s nearly impossible to describe—something like running at full speed to the edge of a cliff and then pulling back at the last moment, over and over and over again.”

In June this year, the 236-page U.S. State Department Trafficking in Persons Report identified Malaysia as a Tier 3 country along with countries such as Bahrain, Burma, North Korea, Iran and Uzbekistan. Malaysia is one of the “worst offenders” when it comes to sex trafficking, bonded labour, and child prostitution. Awareness and response to this crime is, Malaysian humanitarians acknowledge, shamefully low. The report noted that Malaysia has “failed to fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so.”

The Malaysian government did not establish the government-run shelter for foreign trafficking victims promised in 2004, and without procedures for the identification of victims, it continued to

treat certain trafficking victims as illegal immigrants, and duly arrest, incarcerate, and deport them. “The Malaysian government,” the report concluded, “needs to demonstrate stronger political will to tackle Malaysia’s significant forced labour and sex trafficking problems.”

The government passed the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act this year, a potentially powerful tool to address this issue, prior to the release of the U.S. report. The Act carries a penalty of up to 20 years’ jail and a fine of up to RM500,000 for human traffickers, while providing protection to victims. The new law will go into effect by the end of the year, according to press reports.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi responded to the U.S. charges indirectly. “Certainly human trafficking is a crime, and that has to be stopped. We will do whatever we can (to halt it).” Other members of the cabinet did not mince words.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar slammed the U.S. for lumping the country along with those listed above, among others, saying that the report was one-sided. “As far as we are concerned, Malaysia is a country that does not encourage trafficking in persons. We will have the necessary enforcement to prevent the use of Malaysia as a point of transit and trafficking in persons,” he said.

Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil went even further in a statement released to the press, noting that putting Malaysia in the blacklist was “unfair and unreasonable.”

“We are very disappointed with the report as it is inaccurate and does not reflect Malaysia’s continuous efforts in combating human trafficking,” she said.—Ed

A Jigini or servant of God, bona fide sex slaves for upper caste men in Andhra Pradesh, India.



A child scavenges for a living at a rubbish dump in Jakarta.

He cites the difficulty some have in understanding the relationship between pornography and human trafficking as an example. “The erosion of morality doesn’t happen all at once,” he exhales. “It happens one step at a time. Abuse happens in the mind before manifesting physically. Pornography is the perfect primer for this mindset. It has led to millions becoming addicted to fantasies in which they exert total control over others. They begin to believe they have this power—this right—in reality. And it leads to others, especially children, becoming objectified in both fantasy and reality. So it only makes sense that most of the pornography available features trafficking victims.”

He pauses. “Let us know who you are and what you do,” he says. “Tell us what your talents and skills are. In particular, we need trained investigators and computer experts. With the proper organization, networking and data based intelligence, we can hit back with some severity. We need to be ruthless, even vicious. We need to go after the traffickers’ money, their computers, and their networks. Introduce us to associates who can help. For raid and rescue, give me ten Jack Bauers [from TV series 24] and we’ll start to shake things up a bit; for rehabilitation, give me a few thousand grandmothers.”

Yes, he acknowledges, his life is constantly

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“The laws necessary to fight child trafficking need to be enacted and enforced,” Bechard emphasizes. “If not, then countries making real efforts to protect victims while prosecuting criminals must place sanctions on those that do not. Enforcement is necessary. For pedocriminals, criteria of best practice laws have to be established. Governments must put pressure on other nations to enact and enforce laws that punish pedocrime as a major offence. With slavery, we have a choice: vigilance or complicity.”

He advises those who want to buy an oriental carpet to access [www.rugmark.org](http://www.rugmark.org), and those who want to buy food manufactured without slavery to surf [www.transfairusa.org](http://www.transfairusa.org). Think twice, he says, before buying your partner a diamond ring. 90% of Indian diamonds are produced by child slaves, and in Africa, child slaves begin work at the age of six in the mines and work ten to fourteen hours a day, every day.

In his book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Viking), Jared Diamond describes a phenomenon he calls “creeping normalcy.” Bechard agrees with his idea that as a culture becomes increasingly dysfunctional, younger generations have increasing difficulty recognising dysfunction as they have no other point of reference.

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threatened, but the satisfaction of his work is immeasurable. “The deepest places in the heart are reserved for the eternal,” he says. “When a man lives his life within that perspective, it aligns all that he is and all that he does. He can change the world. I have a beautiful stand of trees near my home. It’s the perfect place to sit. Yet those trees were planted by a man over 100 years ago. He never got to sit in their shade. I never forget that I sit in the shade of trees I didn’t plant.” ■



Those interested can contact Bechard at [info@ahavakids.com](mailto:info@ahavakids.com) or through Ahava Kids, P.O. Box 498, Old Saybrook, CT, USA. Donations can be made through [www.ahavakids.org](http://www.ahavakids.org), or mailed to the above address. *Unspeakable: The Hidden Truth Behind the World’s Fastest Growing Crime* is available through Amazon.com