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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Imam Ali's Popular Students Relief Society, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 January 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



The Plight of Child Waste Pickers in the Islamic Republic of Iran

The International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 182, which the Islamic Republic of Iran ratified on November 29, 2001, explicitly mandates the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor. According to clause 4 of Article 1 of the regulation, work in the collection, transportation, and disposal of urban waste is identified as one of the worst forms of child labor. This commitment is reinforced by the Islamic Republic of Iran's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Both conventions obligate member states to protect children from economic exploitation and hazardous work jeopardizing their education, health, or development.

Despite these commitments, the Islamic Republic of Iran faces a critical challenge in the widespread exploitation of child labor, particularly in the urban waste collection sector. As reported in January 2024 by the CEO of Tehran's Waste Management Organization, a 'garbage collection mafia' is profiting enormously from the exploitation of child labor, with earnings exceeding thirty trillion Iranian rials from dry waste alone. These groups employ child laborers, often in violation of national and international laws, with impunity. Shockingly, some children are compensated with drugs instead of money.

Imam Ali's Popular Students Relief Society (IAPSRS) has been actively involved with child waste pickers for a long time and has witnessed their living conditions in many cities of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In metropolises like Tehran, a significant number of child laborers, particularly from the vulnerable Afghan migrant population, find themselves trapped in a cycle of exploitation. Many of these children, often without their parents, are smuggled across borders into the Islamic Republic of Iran and immediately thrust into labor facilitated by relatives. They endure grueling work schedules, sometimes up to eighteen to twenty hours daily, primarily collecting recyclable waste.

These children, burdened with loads far exceeding their own weight, are transported by heavy vehicles to various contract areas in the city. There, they gather recyclable materials from designated streets and alleys. The same vehicles later return them to separation centers, which dubiously serve both as their workplace and living quarters. In these centers, the children spend hours sorting waste, and their rest is limited to a few hours, often spent amidst garbage and insects.

Lacking legal documentation, these children are denied fundamental rights, including access to health and education. Their vulnerability is further compounded by their small stature, often a result of malnutrition and excessive labor, making them prone to accidents like being hit by cars. Such incidents frequently go unreported and unaccounted for.

The financial compensation for their labor is meager, falling well below minimum wage standards and without any benefits or insurance. This scant income is typically sent back to their families in Afghanistan. Additionally, some municipal street order officers exploit these children by illegally demanding money for work permits that are only recognized within their immediate working area, further skimming their already paltry earnings.

This exploitation of child laborers in Tehran is not just a random occurrence but a systematic and structural issue. Allegations suggest that various mid-level and senior managers in municipalities, other departments, and security centers are complicit in this profitable scheme, perpetuating the cycle of abuse and deprivation faced by these children.

In 2021, a study revealed a distressing situation in Tehran: approximately 4,700 children were engaged in waste separation workshops. This number has escalated significantly due to the economic crises triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with mismanagement and soaring inflation. The situation is exacerbated by the systematic exploitation of these children in city-run waste management programs.

Compounding this issue, many families, driven by financial desperation and the inflated costs of basic necessities like housing and food, have resorted to scavenging recyclable waste. In a desperate bid to cope, they have pulled their children out of school to join this grim trade. Despite possibilities for altering waste collection methods, no changes have been implemented, largely due to the profits entrenched in the current system.

Amidst this bleak landscape, a surge of 'migrant-phobia' has been stoked by the regime. The Islamic Republic of Iran's authorities have initiated deportations of street-working children and their families, particularly targeting Afghan migrants. Even Afghan children holding legal identity documents have been subjected to harsh penalties. However, despite these crackdowns, the influx of child waste pickers across borders persists, inadvertently fueling the profits of those who run this exploitative 'waste mafia.' This situation highlights a harrowing intersection of economic hardship, exploitation, and systemic failures, impacting the most vulnerable: children forced into labor under perilous and inhumane conditions.

Imam Ali's Popular Students Relief Society (IAPSRS), which has been at the forefront of advocating for these children's rights, has faced severe repression from the state. Accusations of 'tarnishing the country's image' and other pretexts have been used to dissolve this organization and stifle voices advocating for change. Members of Imam Ali's Popular Students Relief Society (IAPSRS), who were advocating for the rights of child waste pickers across the country, were under surveillance by security agencies for years and were questioned for their peaceful and civil activities.

Despite the clear evidence of exploitation and violation of children's rights in the waste-picking sector, no official has been held accountable. The climate of fear and repression is so pervasive that lawyers, ministers, or judiciary representatives do not dare to challenge or question these issues. This situation underscores a significant gap in the protection of human rights and the rule of law, where those who stand up for the most vulnerable are targeted by the state. Further compounding the issue, the Judiciary's Human Rights Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran failed to address Convention No. 182 in implementing international treaties and agreements that the Islamic Republic of Iran has acceded to and are equivalent to law.

The plight of these children must not be ignored. The UN Human Rights Council has the opportunity to advocate for these vulnerable individuals and to ensure that the Iranian government adheres to its international legal obligations. Only through concerted international effort and pressure can we hope to see an end to the exploitation of children in urban waste collection and the fulfillment of their fundamental human rights.
