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ILO: Rapid growth reducing Asia poverty

By KELLY OLSEN, AP Business Writer *49 minutes ago*

Economic growth in China and India has dramatically reduced the number of people in Asia subsisting below the poverty level of \$1 a day, but the total remains in the hundreds of millions, the International Labor Organization said Tuesday.

Since 1990 about 250 million people have risen above that benchmark, said the report, titled "Labor and Social Trends in Asia and the Pacific 2006: Progress toward Decent Work."

The report came as the U.N. agency that covers work and workplace issues opened a four-day meeting Tuesday in the South Korean port city of Busan. The International Labor Organization meeting is meant to examine the impact of globalization and development on work in Asia-Pacific and find ways to improve conditions in the region, home to 60 percent of the global work force.

"Globalization has given many benefits to countries and individuals in the 21st century," South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun said in a keynote speech. He added, however, that "we must not forget that the benefits of globalization can be unequally distributed."

Representatives from some 40 countries and regions in Asia-Pacific as well as workers' and employers' organizations were attending the U.N. agency's Asian Regional Meeting through Friday. Other leaders attending the opening day were Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayaka and Jordanian Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit.

About 50 protesters from various South Korean labor groups gathered outside the venue to wave banners and shout slogans calling for the end of discrimination against disabled and migrant workers and criticizing the government's labor policies. Some were in wheelchairs. About 300 black-clad riot police with shields stood nearby.

The ILO report will form a basis for much of the discussion at the meeting. Its findings show that while economic and working conditions in Asia have improved, much remains to be done.

More than 600 million Asians live below the \$1-a-day poverty level, or "more than two-thirds of the world's poor," the report said. "If the poverty line is raised to \$2 a day, Asia has about 1.9 billion poor people," or more than three-fourths of the world total, it said.

The percentage of people living on \$1 a day in South Asia, which includes India and Bangladesh, dropped to 28.4 percent in 2003 from 40.9 percent in 1990, the report said. In East Asia, which includes China, it fell to 14.9 percent from 31.2 percent.

"We must ... bring the poor into the process" of development, Sri Lanka's Wickremanayaka said in a speech. "But this must be done without exploiting their cheap labor and without abusing their human rights and their dignity."

Lin Lean Lim, ILO deputy regional director, lauded Asia for achieving high growth rates. "But in terms of jobs, of new jobs for people, we haven't done so well," she said.

In China, for instance, where gross domestic product grew 59 percent and productivity surged nearly 40 percent between 2000 and 2004, growth in job creation managed about 5 percent, the agency's report said.

And most Southeast Asian countries had higher joblessness in 2004 than in 1995, suggesting that the region is still suffering the effects of the 1997-98 financial crisis in the form of weak job creation, it said.

The ILO report also cited progress in the area of child labor.

It said the number of working children, defined as being between the ages of 5 and 14, in Asia fell to 122.3 million in 2004 from 127.3 million in 2000, citing improved access to education. Still, Asia has about two-thirds of the world's children who work.

In the worst cases, the report said children in the region are subjected to "slavery, trafficking into exploitative situations, debt bondage and other forms of forced labor, forced recruitment into armed conflict, prostitution, pornography and other illicit activities."

The meeting, normally held every four years, was originally scheduled for 2005 in Busan, a major South Korean port city, but tensions between South Korean labor organizations and the government forced organizers to postpone it.

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