Rescue Operation Photo Journal
International Justice Mission is a human rights organisation that secures justice for victims of bonded labour, sexual exploitation and other forms of violence.
According to the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976, the government is responsible for rescuing bonded labourers. IJM works closely with the District Administration at every stage of the rescue operation. The rescue team, consisting of local government officials and the police, ensures that bonded labourers have a chance of freedom and that offenders are brought to justice.
As soon as government officials receive a complaint and decide to address the case, the rescue team enters the worksite, where the labourers can be found working.
Bonded labourers live in dangerous and squalid conditions—without safe drinking water, access to medical help or proper shelter from weather conditions. They often build their make-shift tents with plastic tarps, saris or palm leaves. Children living at the worksite do not have proper clothing and are also unable to attend school.
Upon arrival at the worksite, government officials begin a preliminary inquiry process with all the victims to assess their conditions as labourers. Often, the labourers and their families plead to leave the worksite, understanding that this is perhaps their only chance to escape bondage.
Bonded labourers are forced to work extremely long hours with very little rest or food. In many woodcutting units, labourers often work barefoot, cutting branches and thorny bushes using large knives. They are expected to meet unreasonable work quotas, but are never paid fairly.
Although they are initially promised good wages, labourers are paid far below the minimum wage recommended by the state. In this notebook, the owner calculates how much he owes a labourer, but falsifies the final value. Rather than paying the correct amount of Rs. 5,678, he plans to only return Rs. 567. Further questioning by the authorities reveals that Rs. 200 will be given in cash, while the remaining amount of Rs. 367 is deducted from their debt advance.
Once the government officials confirm the presence of bonded labour, they encourage the labourers to pack their belongings and leave the worksite. Here, a family quickly packs their meager belongings in a bag, as their young child watches. It is common to find children with their parents—often sleeping among bricks and thorny bushes until they are old enough to start working themselves.
Families gather together to leave the worksite on a bus. A young child looks out from the bus, relief and happiness flooding his face as he realises that he never has to return to this place of bondage!
Police officers are always a part of the rescue team, and they provide protection for both the rescue team and the bonded labourers. In the picture below, a compassionate policeman quickly leads a man, who has been bonded for 16 years, out of a mat-making unit into freedom.
After labourers are accompanied out of the worksite, the government documents the formal statements of each bonded labourer at a safe location. Then, a Release Certificate is issued, declaring that the victim is now free from his or her bonded debt. It also entitles each of the bonded labourers to government rehabilitation benefits.
As the government prepares each Release Certificate, IJM social workers counsel bonded labourers to determine their specific physical and psychosocial needs. After months and years of physical and verbal abuse, it is important that rescued bonded labourers are provided with appropriate trauma care, counselling and rehabilitation.
As they wait for their parents to complete the documentation process, the children are encouraged to occupy their time with colouring pictures—a simple pleasure they have been denied at the worksite.
After a long process of documentation, the government officials issue each rescued bonded labourer with their Release Certificates and Rs. 1,000 as an initial compensation. In the months to come, rescued labourers will receive another Rs. 19,000, enabling them to begin their new lives in freedom.
When they are finally declared free, IJM social workers communicate to the entire group the difficulties they may face once they are back in their villages. The labourers are told that they are now responsible for making their own choices. This is often a terrifying proposition for labourers who have never had the right or opportunity to make independent decisions.
Freedom begins the moment the labourer chooses to walk out of the worksite. But healing and reintegrating into society is often a slow and arduous process. IJM continues to walk alongside rescued victims for the next two years, helping them to make healthy and empowering decisions.