

Claims on engaging child labour puts India in US cross hairs

US threatens to put India on a list of countries that allegedly use child labour in producing hand-crafted carpet, a move that could impact exports to the US



Under India's amended child labour laws, employment of children below the age of 14 is prohibited. Photo: PTI

New Delhi: The US labour department has threatened to put India on a list of countries that allegedly use child labour in producing hand-crafted carpet, a move that could impact Indian exports to the US. Under an executive order issued in 1999, the US lists countries and products for "Prohibition of Acquisition of Products Produced by Forced or Indentured Child Labor".

This list is intended to ensure that US federal agencies do not procure goods made by forced or indentured child labour. At present, the US labour department has named India on a list for products such as bricks, hybrid cottonseed, embellished textiles, garments, rice and stones.

For example, while listing India in garments, the US labour department said: "Some children, as young as age five, are recruited for work through an advance payment to their parents, creating a situation of debt bondage which the child must work to repay. The children are isolated, often live at the worksite, and face restricted freedom of movement. Some children are exposed to dye and toxic

chemicals without protective equipment; and some are forced to work overtime, even when they are sick. Some children are punished and threatened with verbal and physical abuse, financial penalty, and some are routinely deprived of food, water, and sleep."

A labour ministry official requesting anonymity said the US has a record of banning sectors from supplying products on apprehension child labour is deployed there. "The hand-crafted carpet industry was the recent one to be on their radar. The fear is that if US imposes any restriction on import, it will harm the Indian carpet industry financially and the Union government is taking steps to dispel the misconception," he added.

Under India's amended child labour laws, employment of children below the age of 14 is prohibited, the official said. Employing child labour is a cognizable offence attracting a jail term of up to two years under the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act 2016. Children below 14 will be allowed to work only in family enterprises and farms after school hours and during holidays.

"Putting India's name in the list would mean government procurement of that commodity will not happen though there is no restriction on import by private parties. Though there is no government procurement of carpets by the US from India, we have objected to the move holding it will create a new barrier for trade that will impact private procurements as well," a commerce ministry official said.

India has also questioned US authorities on the premise of their move based on the report of US-based human right activist and academic Siddharth Kara holding it to be "biased and carried out without proper sampling".

Kara, a fellow at the Carr Centre for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University, authored a report titled *Tainted Carpets: Slavery and Child Labour In India's Hand-made Carpet Sector* in 2014. He claimed that entire Muslim villages were held in debt bondage for carpet weaving in rural areas near Shahjahanpur (Uttar Pradesh), and Morena and Gwalior (Madhya Pradesh) and reported incidence of human trafficking and child slavery near Panipat, Haryana.

The commerce ministry official said a government-sponsored parallel study by PriceWaterhouseCoopers showed incidence of child labour has come down significantly in the carpet-weaving industry and that there is no case of forced or indentured child labour.

"Though we have no hesitation in admitting that there are a few cases of child labour in the carpet industry, there is no case of forced or indentured child labour as the child may be working at home with his parents. Such issues are directly proportionate to a country's development journey and one should not take a moral high ground on such matters," he added.

