

This is very interesting information. I would suggest that more is done to get Firestone to take this case seriously. Blacks worldwide should stop buying Firestone products. As a matter of fact, Blacks should align themselves with those companies that support and are prepared to join us in making reparations a reality. What will change corporate behaviour is loss of market share. Blacks have significant purchasing power and are prolific consumers of automobile products. Refusal to purchase Firestone products could adversely affect their market position. It is time we spent our money where we get respect and support for our struggle.

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Firestone takes heat over plantation labor
By Shashank Bengali
McClatchy Newspapers

HARBEL, Liberia — The wake-up call comes each morning before 4:30. In the dark, 6,000 men follow the faint beams of flashlights to their assigned spaces on a massive farm of rubber trees.

As night melts into day in the West African nation of Liberia, each worker will tend up to 650 trees, collecting sap in a pair of metal buckets hanging from a wooden pole balanced on one shoulder. In one backbreaking day, a worker will collect several hundred pounds of the sap, better known as latex, to be shipped to the United States to make tires, surgical gloves, condoms and other goods.

For that, a worker might earn less than \$4 from the plantation owner, U.S. tire giant Firestone.

In Liberia, a war-ravaged country with 80 percent unemployment, almost any job is a good one. But Firestone is increasingly under fire from human-rights advocates who say the conditions on the 80-year-old plantation — the single-biggest source of raw material for Firestone's U.S. manufacturing operations — are a scandal.

The International Labor Rights Fund, a Washington advocacy group, filed a federal class-action suit against Firestone for what it calls "a gulag of misery" on the 200-square-mile estate in Harbel, believed to be the largest rubber plantation in the world.

The lawsuit alleges that Firestone's Liberian employees are overworked, underpaid, exposed to pesticides and other hazardous chemicals, and risk injury because of inadequate safety measures.

The group also describes harsh living conditions for the workers, known as tappers, and their families. Much of the housing is decades old, with extended families sharing one-room shacks without electricity

or toilets while managers live nearby on a comfortable compound featuring a golf course.

The suit, pending before a federal judge in Indiana, names the Nashville, Tenn.-based Firestone and its Japanese parent, Bridgestone. The company denies the allegations and asked the judge to dismiss the case; a ruling is expected in early 2007.

Firestone, Liberia's largest private employer, says its workers are paid an average of \$5.29 daily, several times more than a civil servant's salary. The pay was set through collective bargaining and is based on the number of trees each worker taps, although several workers interviewed recently said that after payroll deductions they often took home less than \$4 for a day's work.

Firestone also says it provides primary education and medical care to workers and their families in a country where a 1989-2003 civil war forced most schools and hospitals to close.

"They're good-paying jobs by Liberian standards, and they come with an array of social services that are absolutely essential to people's well-being," said Dan MacDonald, a Firestone spokesman in Nashville.

But many Liberians have long resented Firestone's labor practices. Harbel is a Firestone creation. It is named for founder Harvey Firestone and his wife, Idabelle, after the company signed a 99-year lease in 1926 for 1 million acres of coastal lowlands, an ideal environment for planting rubber trees.

The deal made Firestone the biggest private investor in Liberia.

Harvesting rubber is a labor-intensive process in which workers tap trees, apply pesticides, clean cups and buckets with industrial solvents, and transport latex up to 150 pounds at a time on foot to a central site, where it is readied for shipment to the United States.

In March 2005, a grass-roots group, the Save My Future Foundation, published a report detailing widespread labor and environmental abuses, including cases of child labor. According to the report, Firestone tappers worked without gloves or other safety materials and were subjected to quotas that often demanded 14-hour workdays, leading many to enlist their children to help.

The report caught the attention of rights groups worldwide. Liberia's new president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, visited the plantation this year and described some housing units as unsatisfactory.

Firestone has responded to the criticism by building several housing facilities and its first high school, and renovating the hospital.

Samuel Kofi Woods, recently appointed minister of

labor, said the efforts were a step in the right direction. Woods has accused Firestone of engaging in "modern-day slavery," but says that successive Liberian governments tolerated the abuses. "We have produced corrupt leaders that were not accountable. So we also share the blame."

Johnson-Sirleaf has initiated reviews of all contracts involving natural resources. That includes the Firestone deal, recently extended to 2042.

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Sincerely,
John Edwards