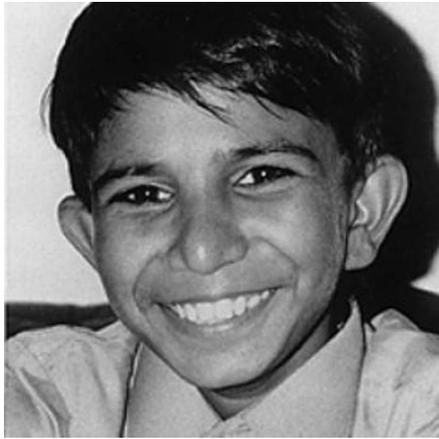




RESOURCE 4

THE STORY OF IQBAL MASIH



Source: [MORAL HEROES](#)

In the mid-1990s, a bright young boy made a global impact on the issue of child slavery. Iqbal Masih's life was cut short just shy of 13 years, but his powerful and eloquent speeches encouraged thousands of bonded labourers and child slaves to follow his example. He brought awareness and promoted education so that others could stand up for their rights and end the injustice in sweat shops around the world.

In 1983, Iqbal Masih was born in the poor community of Maridke outside Lahore, Pakistan. His family was financially burdened, and his father Saif Masih decided to leave when Iqbal was young. When he was 4 years old, Iqbal's mother Inayat needed funds to pay for his older brother's wedding. Because the family was already in debt, she took out a loan in Iqbal's name from a local businessman. However, when their debt went unpaid for two years she was forced to 'loan' Iqbal as a labourer to pay off the debt.

Iqbal became one of the many child bonded labourers at a carpet factory. Despite working 14-hour days six days a week, Iqbal never earned enough money to pay off the debt, the cost of his 'apprenticeship', his tools, his food, fines for his mistakes or the rising interest. Though considered 'debt bonded', he was really like millions of other children who were enslaved to their employers without hope of earning their freedom. Bonded labour, child labour and slave labour were all outlawed in Pakistan. However, it ran rampant due to a corrupt government and a police force that was living off the bribes of local businessmen.

'Children should have pens in their hands; not tools' – Iqbal Masih

When Iqbal was 10 years old he made up his mind to escape. He had endured hot, cramped conditions, air filled with wool debris and countless whippings, beatings and cuttings whenever his work slowed. Though stunted by malnutrition and weakened by lack of exercise, Iqbal and a few of his friends escaped. He ran to the local police and explained how the employer was beating the children and keeping them as slaves. Unfortunately, the police officer was more willing to receive



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the 'finder's fee' for escaped slaves and returned Iqbal to Arshad, Iqbal's owner. At the direction of the police officer, Iqbal was chained to the carpet machine and Arshad forced him back to work with a combination of physical abuse and starvation.

At the age of 12, Iqbal found a way to attend a Freedom Day celebration held by the bricklayer unions. There, Iqbal heard about his rights as a labourer and that debt slavery was outlawed a few years before. In addition to the law against slavery, the government had cancelled all debts with businesses so they could in turn free those indebted to them. However, very few businesses actually released their slaves. When others were asked to speak before the crowd Iqbal volunteered. After hearing Iqbal's story, one of the union leaders named Ehsan Ullah Khan organised an effort to free Iqbal from bondage. After much convincing about the illegality of his factory, Arshad freed Iqbal and some of the other child slaves.

The 12-year-old Iqbal became a prominent leader of the anti-slave movement in Pakistan. He attended the Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF) School for former child slaves and quickly completed a four-year education in only two years. As his understanding of labour laws and human rights grew, he began using his energetic personality to speak on behalf of the enslaved workers. He would sneak into factories and begin asking the children about their experiences and if they were slaves. Even though this was an incredibly risky job, his malnourished body and stunted growth made him appear to be only around six years old, so he was rarely perceived as a threat.

The BLLF sent him to speak at businesses and demonstrations all over Pakistan where bonded slavery was known to exist. With his powerful personality he educated the slave labourers and encouraged them to escape. Despite death threats from the organised business mafias that dominated the communities, Iqbal continued to speak against their practices with confidence and eloquence. It is estimated that over 3 000 Pakistani children escaped their owners after visiting rallies, hearing speeches and attending meetings put on by the BLLF that year.

Because of his powerful story, Iqbal Masih began visiting other countries, raising awareness of child slaves and advocating their freedom. Everywhere he went he inspired others (especially children) to become involved in the mission to end child slavery.

'I would like to do what Abraham Lincoln did... I would like to do it in Pakistan' - Iqbal Masih

After a visit to speak in the United States in December 1994, Iqbal returned home to Pakistan. He would spend the last few months of his life attending school in the hope of becoming a lawyer to fight on behalf of bonded labourers.

On 16 April 1995, Iqbal was assassinated when he was shot in the back with a shotgun. He was riding home on a bicycle with some friends after attending mass earlier in the day.

The official police report claims that it was fired accidentally by a local farmer named Ashraf Hero. The police claimed he confessed to the accident after hours of being tortured. Because Iqbal was a prominent enemy of the local Carpet Manufacturer Mafia, the Pakistani Human Rights Commission looked into the murder, but quickly agreed with the police story. Despite the official report, most people believe that Iqbal Masih was assassinated by an agent of the Carpet Manufacturer Mafia who already held influence over the police, and that Ashraf Hero was framed for the murder.



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Iqbal Masih is our hero because he took courageous action on behalf of child slaves and bonded labourers in Pakistan and around the world. Despite his short life, his passionate and powerful message encouraged thousands to seek freedom and inspired many more around the world to join in his efforts. There are still an estimated 75 000 slaves in Pakistan today. One organisation, [Free the Children](#) was started by a Canadian youth named Craig Kielburger who had heard about Iqbal's story and wanted to help make a difference.

Source: [MORAL HEROES](#), Written by J Kile | last updated on 8 May 2012

