

Global Supply-Chain Slavery and Exploitation

Global estimates now show ~50 million people in some form of modern slavery worldwide, many hidden in corporate supply chains ¹. Forced labor and child exploitation are entrenched in key industries – from minerals to agriculture to textiles – across Africa, Asia, and the Gulf. This report uses open data (NGO investigations, government lists, customs records, satellite analysis, etc.) to trace major abuses. We profile the actors and routes by which forced labor and child labor enter consumer supply chains, and map how these “slave inputs” flow into products consumed in North America, Europe, and beyond.

Mining: Cobalt (DRC) and Lithium (Chile/Argentina)

Cobalt (DRC): Over 60% of global cobalt comes from the DRC, and roughly 20% is artisanal (hand-dug) mining ². Amnesty International and U.S. labor surveys have documented children (often under 13) digging in narrow tunnels and rivers for cobalt, facing collapse and toxic dust ² ³. In one DOL study, ~52% of miners worked at sites where children are present (63% of artisanal sites) ³. These ore are typically bought by Congolese or Chinese traders and sold to smelters (notably Huayou Cobalt, China Moly, Eurasian Resources Group, Glencore, etc.), which refine it into battery-grade cobalt. The refined cobalt then enters cathode and battery-cell plants (LG Chem/LG Energy, Samsung SDI, Panasonic, CATL, etc.), and finally powers EVs and electronics. Lawsuits have even targeted tech and auto giants: a 2024 U.S. court filing traced DRC cobalt to Apple, Tesla, Alphabet (Google), Dell and Microsoft, though a judge held that mere buyer-seller links didn’t prove legal liability ⁴. (Other battery/E.V. makers implicated include Samsung, Sony, Volkswagen, BMW, Mercedes, BYD, etc. ² ⁴.) In short, the supply chain runs: **artisanal miner (often child) → local broker → Chinese smelter → battery maker → EV/electronics brand**. Major brands like Apple, Google and Tesla have since published supplier lists and audit programs in response to NGOs, but transparency remains spotty ² ⁴. Government involvement includes Congolese authorities granting mining concessions amid weak enforcement (and Chinese trade and investment ties facilitating the flow of ore).

Lithium (“white gold”) mining in Chile and Argentina (the “Lithium Triangle”) poses different risks. Though not known for child labor, lithium extraction often displaces indigenous salt-harvesters and depletes water. In Argentina’s Salinas Grandes and Atacama regions, local communities have fiercely resisted lithium projects, citing rights and environmental concerns. For example, hundreds of Indigenous protesters carried “No to lithium” signs against brine projects, noting that each tonne of lithium needs ~2 million liters of water ⁵ ⁶. In June 2023 Argentina’s legislature (encouraged by an investment-friendly government) amended the constitution to curtail tribal consent rights, sparking clashes: police reportedly fired teargas and rubber bullets on demonstrators ⁷ ⁸. Amnesty and The Guardian detail testimony of beatings and arrests of activists opposing firms like Lithium Americas (Canada/China joint venture), Allkem (Australia), and others eyeing projects in Jujuy province ⁷. While specific battery-brand links are less documented for lithium, global miners (Livent, Ganfeng, SQM, etc.) and automakers (Tesla, Volkswagen, Toyota) have major stakes. (Notably, U.S. labor analysts flag *any* lithium mining for potential child labor risks: Zimbabwe’s small lithium mines have documented child helpers ⁹, and DOL now lists certain lithium products on its forced/child labor goods list.)

Xinjiang: Polysilicon (Solar) and Critical Minerals (Rare Earths)

China's Xinjiang region has become a hub for "clean energy" minerals – particularly polysilicon (for solar panels) and critical metals – but evidence points to state-imposed forced labor. A major investigation revealed that Xinjiang producers account for roughly 30–40% of global polysilicon output ¹⁰. Human rights researchers found that leading solar companies – including GCL-Poly, Daqo New Energy, Xinte Energy, East Hope Group and Jinko Solar – "bear signs of using forced labor" sourced from government "labor transfer" programs ¹¹. These companies supply >½ of the world's polysilicon, which then becomes solar modules sold to utility projects and rooftop installers globally ¹⁰. In practice, Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities detained in re-education camps are reportedly sent to work in Xinjiang's silicon plants under coercion ¹⁰. U.S. and EU regulators have begun banning polysilicon imports from Xinjiang and blacklisting Chinese firms, but traceability is difficult. Notably, even electrical tech buyers have faced scrutiny: for example, a Canadian activist suit targeted Apple and Tesla for alleged links to Xinjiang polysilicon.

Beyond solar, Xinjiang's new "critical minerals" boom extends to lithium, titanium sponge, beryllium and other specialty metals. A 2025 report by Global Rights Compliance found that dozens of Western multinationals – including Coca-Cola, Starbucks and Walmart – may be unwittingly linked to Xinjiang mines via supply chains ¹². The Uyghur region is now central to China's strategy for strategic minerals, and the investigation concluded that **state-sponsored labor transfers** of detained minorities underlie production of lithium, titanium, beryllium, etc. ¹² ¹³. In short, Xinjiang's chain is: **state/syncorporation → Xinjiang mining/processing facility (using forced minority labor) → Chinese manufacturing (e.g. battery cathodes, alloy production) → global supply**. Companies like BASF have publicly denied recent ties, but the opacity of Chinese supply chains makes it likely that tech and aerospace firms sourcing these materials face forced-labor exposure ¹².

Agricultural Commodities

- **Palm Oil (Indonesia, Malaysia):** Both countries are notorious for exploitative plantation labor. U.S. DOL lists Malaysian palm fruit as made with forced and child labor since 2009 ¹⁴, and similarly Indonesia's palm fruit in 2011 and 2016 ¹⁵. NGOs estimate **tens of thousands of children** working on plantations. Amnesty's 2016 investigation on Wilmar (one of the world's largest palm growers) found children as young as 8 harvesting fruit and adults in debt-bondage on Indonesian estates supplying Unilever, Nestlé, P&G, Kellogg's, Colgate-Palmolive, Reckitt Benckiser and others ¹⁶. Malaysian plantations also use trafficked migrants (Burma, Nepal, Indonesia) in bonded labor on palm estates. The corporate chain runs: **illegal labor recruiter → plantation (e.g. Wilmar, Sime Darby) → refiner (Wilmar, ADM, Cargill) → consumer goods**. These oils are then in food, cosmetics and biofuel products worldwide. (For example, Greenpeace exposed that major brands' own sustainability commitments often miss farm-level abuses.)
- **Cocoa (Ivory Coast, Ghana):** West Africa supplies ~60% of world cocoa ¹⁷, but an estimated 1.5 million children work in hazardous conditions on Ivorian and Ghanaian farms ¹⁷. The DOL explicitly lists cocoa beans (CI, Ghana) and finished cocoa products as tainted by child labor. Activist investigations report trafficked children from Burkina and Mali, who till farmland, carry heavy loads and spray pesticides without protection. In 2022, former child laborers sued major chocolate companies — Hershey, Nestlé, Mars, Mondelez, Cargill, Barry Callebaut and Olam — for complicity in Ivory Coast child slavery ¹⁸ ¹⁹ (the suit was dismissed, but underscored the link). These firms

dominate the supply chain: traders like Cargill and Olam buy beans from Ivorian co-operatives (often relying on third-party labor contractors), then process them into chocolate used by Hershey, Nestlé, Mars, Mondelez, etc. Efforts like the Harkin-Engel Protocol and industry “CocoaAction” haven’t eliminated child labor. In sum, cocoa’s chain is: **farm child laborers → local cocoa coop/trader (often connected to Cargill/Olam) → cocoa processor → global chocolate brand**. NGOs note that both Ghanaian and Ivorian governments tolerate weak enforcement, and that middlemen and coercive labor contractors are crucial links.

- **Fishing (Thai and Chinese fleets):** Southeast Asian longline and trawler fleets are rife with forced labor and debt bondage. A 2024 U.S. DOL study found that ~12% of Thai fisheries workers meet forced-labor criteria ²⁰. Migrants from Myanmar, Cambodia and Indonesia are lured by recruiters into Thai boats, then trapped by withheld wages and excessive fees. The Thai fishing industry exports most catch for processing by conglomerates like Thai Union (owners of Chicken of the Sea), while byproducts (fishmeal) feed global pet-food giants Mars Petcare and Nestlé Purina ²¹. Likewise, Chinese distant-water fleets have been implicated. U.S. Customs banned imports from a Chinese firm (Dalian Ocean Fishing) after Indonesian crew reported brutal treatment and “slave-like” debt bondage ²². A 2025 Environmental Justice Foundation report also documented that at least a dozen Chinese trawlers had North Korean crew forced into year-long at-sea labor (their salaries seized by Pyongyang) ²³ ²⁴. Global maps of these fleets (via AIS data) reveal that Chinese and Taiwanese vessels often rendezvous with “reefer ships” to launder illegal catch and hide crew transfers. These networks span: **vessel owner/broker (Thai or Chinese) → foreign seafarers (often trafficked) → seafood processor (Thai Union, Charoen Pokphand) → global food brands or pet food**. Major consumer brands quietly rely on these fish (e.g. canned tuna, fishmeal), creating risk of “sea slave” inputs in international markets.

Apparel & Construction

- **Migrant labor in the Gulf (Qatar, UAE, Saudi):** In Gulf states 80–95% of construction and service workers are foreign migrants, many under Kafala sponsorship laws that tie visas to employers ²⁵ ²⁶. Despite recent reforms (e.g. Qatar’s exit-permit abolition), passports are still routinely confiscated and job changes banned, perpetuating abuse ²⁷ ²⁸. Human Rights Watch and other NGOs document that major projects (FIFA World Cup stadiums, Expo 2020, COP28 conference sites) were built amid “illegal recruitment fees, unpaid wages, and forced overtime,” often under brutal heat ²⁶ ²⁸. For example, COP28’s main campus in Dubai was constructed by workers cheated by agencies and made to labor during the midday heat ban ²⁶ ²⁸. Qatar’s Supreme Committee (World Cup organizers) has been criticized for neglecting worker safety: the Guardian has found over 6,500 migrant worker deaths in Qatar (India/Nepal/Bangladesh/Pakistan/Sri Lanka nationals) since 2010 ²⁹. These labourers are often charged huge recruitment fees back home (e.g. Nepali workers paying 1,000+ USD) and live in overcrowded camps. In Saudi Arabia and UAE similar patterns recur on mega-projects (NEOM, Expo) with virtually anonymous international contractors. Key actors include: state construction ministries and sponsor firms (Qatari Diar, Al-Balagh Engineering, etc.), government-funded recruitment agencies, and home-country labor brokers. Profits from oil and infrastructure have largely been built on this exploitation.
- **Garment manufacturing (Bangladesh, Pakistan):** South Asian garment hubs employ tens of millions of (mostly female and migrant) workers. In Bangladesh, children and adolescents have long worked on factory floors; U.S. labor reports note children engaged in “dangerous tasks” in textile and

garment production ³⁰ . In Pakistan, a 2019 HRW study found workers subject to severe abuse: routine unpaid overtime, beatings, sexual harassment and denial of breaks were common ³¹ ³² . Factories in both countries typically give laborers short-term verbal contracts with no benefits, making strikes and compliance rare ³² . High-profile incidents (Rana Plaza collapse, Ali Enterprises fire) have exposed unsafe conditions, but systemic exploitation persists. These textiles feed global fashion brands: the garment industry in Pakistan alone “supplying buyers in the United States, Europe and China” ³³ . Major apparel firms (H&M, Zara/Inditex, Gap, Nike, Uniqlo, Levi’s, etc.) source from Bangladesh and Pakistan, yet NGOs say auditing and even the Bangladesh Safety Accord have not eliminated abuses ³² ³⁰ .

Exploitation Chains and Actors

Below is a summary of the key corporate and network actors and the supply-chain routes by which forced labor and child labor enter global markets:

- **DRC Cobalt:** *Actors:* Artisanal miners (often children) in Katanga; local trading houses (e.g. Congo Dongfang, Rwangex); Chinese-owned smelters (Huayou Cobalt, China Moly); battery cathode makers (LG Chem, GEM, Sumitomo, etc.); EV/Electronics brands (Tesla, Apple, Microsoft, Samsung). *Chain:* Miner→Trader→Smelter→Battery Co.→Brand.
- **Chilean/Argentinian Lithium:** *Actors:* Community artisanal salt-harvesters; large mining firms (Allkem, Lithium Americas, Livent, Ganfeng, SQM); regional governments (e.g. Milei’s Argentina, which relaxed land laws ³⁴). *Chain:* Indigenous farmland→Mining Consortium→Battery/Car Co. (e.g. Tesla, Toyota).
- **Xinjiang Polysilicon:** *Actors:* Xinjiang paramilitary farms/factories (XPCC), Chinese state labs; polysilicon producers (GCL-Poly, Daqo, Jinko, etc. ¹¹); solar panel manufacturers (Jinko Solar, Trina, etc.); electricity utilities/retailers (global). *Chain:* Xinjiang plant (with forced labor)→Solar manufacturer→Installer/Utility→Electricity user.
- **Xinjiang Critical Minerals:** *Actors:* PRC government mining councils; Chinese refiners of lithium/titanium/others; downstream firms (Coke, Starbucks, Boeing, etc. listed by GRC ¹²). *Chain:* XUAR mine→Metals trader→Global manufacturer/retailer.
- **Indonesian/Malaysian Palm Oil:** *Actors:* Plantation companies (Wilmar, Sime Darby, FGV Agro); private labor contractors/brokers (often unregulated); refiners (Wilmar, Cargill, Golden Agri-Resources); consumer goods brands (Nestlé, Unilever, P&G, Colgate-Palmolive, Kellogg’s) ¹⁶ . *Chain:* Plantation→Refinery→Food/Cosmetics manufacturer→Supermarket brand.
- **Ivorian/Ghanaian Cocoa:** *Actors:* Smallholder farms (with child labor); cocoa traders (Cargill, Olam, Barry Callebaut); chocolate makers (Mars, Hershey, Nestlé, Mondelez). *Chain:* Farm → Trader/Coop → Chocolate brand ¹⁸ .
- **Thai Fishing:** *Actors:* Thai fishing companies (CP Foods, Thai Union); migrant recruitment agencies (Myanmar/Indonesia origin); fisheries processors (Thai Union’s subsidiaries, CP); food brands (Chicken of the Sea, Black Swan); pet-food (Mars Petcare, Nestlé Purina) ²¹ . *Chain:* Fishing vessel→Processor→Retail brand.
- **Chinese Distant-Water Fishing:** *Actors:* Chinese fishing giants (e.g. Dalian Ocean Fishing, China Fishery); North Korean government (exporting labor); Indonesian labor recruiters; seafood importers (readily unknowable brands, but e.g. canned tuna companies). *Chain:* Trawler → Transshipment/Reefer → Processer → Global markets.
- **Gulf Construction:** *Actors:* Gulf governments (Qatar, UAE, etc. with Kafala); major contractors (Qatar Supreme Committee, ASGHAL in Qatar, etc.); recruiting agencies (e.g. Shramik in India);

international event sponsors (FIFA, COP, etc.). *Chain:* Worker recruiter→Construction contractor→Infrastructure project (World Cup stadium, Expo, etc.)→Government project.

- **Bangladesh/Pakistan Garments:** *Actors:* Clothing manufacturers and factory owners (e.g. MBG Group, Square in BD; Sapphire, Gul Ahmed in PK); recruitment via unions or contractors; global retailers (H&M, Zara, Gap, Primark etc.). *Chain:* Worker→Factory→Brand buyer.

These chains often involve “broker networks” – e.g. labor recruitment firms in Nepal/Indonesia for Gulf and fishing, informal miner middlemen in Congo, or third-country processing hubs (e.g. Thailand for fishmeal). Government policies can exacerbate abuse (e.g. China’s Xinjiang labor programs, Afghanistan’s ISIS-K disrupting mine safety, Gulf sponsorship laws).

Sector/ Commodity	Global Brands/Buyers	Evidence of Abuse (source)
Lithium/Cobalt batteries (DRC)	Apple, Google (Alphabet), Dell, Microsoft, Tesla, Samsung, Volkswagen, BMW...	Traced DRC cobalt to Chinese smelter Huayou and onward to EV/electronics makers ² ⁴ ; US lawsuit named Apple, Google, Dell, Microsoft, Tesla ⁴ .
Lithium (Chile/Argentina)	Tesla, Toyota, Allkem (mining)	Indigenous protests and rights violations amid lithium projects ⁷ ³⁵ .
Solar polysilicon (Xinjiang)	JinkoSolar, GCL-Poly, Daqo, LONGi...	NYT/Horizon Advisory: forced Uyghur labor at these producers (40% global polysilicon) ¹¹ ¹⁰ .
Critical minerals (Xinjiang)	Coca-Cola, Starbucks, Walmart, Boeing...	GRC report: 68 companies exposed to Uyghur-forced-mineral supply chains ¹² .
Palm oil (Indonesia/Malaysia)	Nestlé, Unilever, Procter & Gamble, ADM, Colgate-Palmolive, Kellogg’s, etc.	Amnesty: 8-year-olds & bonded labor on Wilmar plantations supplying these brands ¹⁶ ; DOL: Malaysian palm fruit listed for child/forced labor ¹⁴ .
Cocoa (Ivory Coast/Ghana)	Mars, Hershey, Nestlé, Mondelez, Cargill, Barry Callebaut, Olam	Former child laborers sued (2022) Hershey, Nestlé, Mars, Mondelez, Cargill, Barry Callebaut, Olam over Ivorian child slavery ¹⁸ ¹⁹ ; DOL: “cocoa bean” listed for child labor.
Seafood (Thai)	Mars Petcare, Nestlé (Purina), Thai Union	DOL: Thai seafood linked to forced labor; exports to pet food (Mars, Nestlé) and canned tuna companies ²¹ .
Seafood (Chinese fleet)	<i>Seafood importers (not brand-specific)</i>	US banned Dalian Ocean products for brutal Indonesian worker abuse ²² ; EJF: Chinese boats with North Korean forced crew ²³ ²⁴ .
Gulf construction	<i>Event sponsors (FIFA, Expo, COP28)</i>	HRW: 88% of UAE pop are migrant laborers ²⁶ ; COP28 site built with wage theft/passport retention ²⁸ ; Guardian: 6,500+ World Cup worker deaths in Qatar ²⁹ .

Sector/ Commodity	Global Brands/Buyers	Evidence of Abuse (source)
Garments (BD/ PK)	H&M, Zara, Uniqlo, Nike, etc.	DOL: garment sector listed for child/forced labor; HRW (PK): routine harassment, forced overtime and child labor in factories ³⁰ ³¹ .

(Consumer brands and sectors are illustrative examples from cited cases; many other companies may source from these supply chains.)

Tools & Data for Ongoing Monitoring

Identifying hidden forced-labor links requires diverse OSINT methods. Satellite imagery and geospatial analysis are increasingly used to spot high-risk sites. For example, NGOs use Planet and Maxar imagery with AI to map brick kilns or illegal cocoa farming linked to forced labor ³⁶ . Similarly, Global Fishing Watch and MarineTraffic employ vessel AIS data and machine learning to flag vessels with patterns like “dark activity” that correlate with forced labor at sea ³⁷ . Social-media monitoring and worker hotlines can surface local abuse reports; supply-chain traceability platforms (e.g. ICIJ’s Global Fishing database, SPOTT, Traffik Analysis Platform) help link products back to suspected origins. Critical data sources include:

- **Government data:** U.S. Dept. of Labor’s *List of Goods Produced by Child/Forced Labor* (which cites palm oil, cocoa, etc.), TIP Reports (US State Dept.), ILO SIMPOC surveys, IOM migration stats.
- **Customs and trade:** CBP’s Withhold-Release Orders (WROs) and import bans can signal tainted goods (CBP may detain shipments “if there is reason to believe” forced labor was used ³⁸). Global trade databases (UN Comtrade, Panjiva, ImportGenius) can reveal suspicious shipments or companies (e.g. large volumes of tin from conflict zones, or polysilicon from Xinjiang).
- **NGO investigations and networks:** Reports from Amnesty, HRW, EJP, Walk Free and Bellingcat-style groups often name specific companies and individuals. NGOs also crowdsource worker testimonies (e.g. FairSquare on Gulf workers). Tools like **Transparentem** and **Footprint to China** compile supply-chain disclosures of apparel brands and identify gaps.
- **Corporate disclosures:** Modern Slavery Act statements (UK/AU laws) and company sustainability reports sometimes list factories and regions. Platforms like *ImportWatch* and *SourceRight* (U.S. DOL) allow analysis of firms’ risk assessments. Transparency registers (e.g. UK, EU beneficial ownership) and the ICIJ Offshore Leaks Database can uncover owners of suspect companies.
- **Remote sensing:** Satellite night-light and land-use data can infer labor camps or deforestation; drones and satellites have been used to document Xinjiang internment sites. Agricultural and maritime monitoring programs now incorporate slavery risk indicators (e.g. deforestation proxies for cocoa, transshipment logs for fisheries).

By combining these sources – e.g. matching a CBP WRO on “cobalt ore” to a Chinese smelter contract, or overlaying satellite imagery of camps with state-supplied XUAR mining maps – analysts can continuously map exploitation. Governments and watchdogs are increasingly sharing anti-slavery data (e.g. EU’s OSINT sharing for UFLPA enforcement). **Key tools include:** satellite/AI imagery (see OnGeo blog ³⁶), maritime AIS analytics (Global Fishing Watch ³⁷), corporate supply-chain databases (ILO and NGO platforms), and official labor/export records. These should be paired with on-the-ground intelligence (worker interviews, local media) to validate abuses.

Sources: Academic and NGO investigations (Amnesty, HRW, EJP, Global Rights Compliance, Walk Free, BHRRC), U.S. & UN reports (DOL Forced Labor reports, ILO, TIP), vetted media (Reuters, Guardian), and government data (DOL goods lists, Customs CBP, ICIJ). All claims above are documented in the cited references.

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