

# Iqbal Masih



## WHY IS IQBAL A NOMINEE?

Iqbal Masih, Pakistan, has been nominated posthumously (after his death) as WCPRC Decade Child Rights Hero 2009, for his struggle for the rights of debt slave children. Iqbal became a debt slave at an early age, for the owner of a carpet factory who then sold him on. Iqbal was probably 5 or 6 when he started working in the carpet factory. He worked from early morning until evening and was often treated badly. Five years later, he was liberated from debt slavery. He started attending the Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF) school. Iqbal talked to his friends who worked at carpet factories and spoke at meetings. He gave many carpet worker children the courage to leave their owners. The owners threatened Iqbal who, after receiving an award in the USA, was murdered on 16 April 1995. He has become a symbol for the fight against harmful child labour all over the world.

In the year 2000, Iqbal received the first World's Children's Prize, which will always have another name, in his memory: the Iqbal Masih Award.

**Iqbal Masih became a debt slave in a carpet factory in Pakistan when he was a child. Five years later he was set free. He gave other children the courage to leave their owners. Iqbal was threatened by the carpet factory owners and was murdered on 16 April 1995. He is a symbol for the struggle against child labour and in 2000, he received the first World's Children's Prize posthumously (after his death). The prize has another name in memory of Iqbal: the Iqbal Masih Award.**

**I**qbal is about five years old when he has his first working day in the carpet factory. Later, when his mother Anayat needs money for an operation, she takes out a loan from a carpet factory owner called Ghullah. The loan, or 'peshgi', is in Iqbal's name. That means that Iqbal owes Ghullah the 5000 rupees (100 US dollars) that his mother's operation cost. Now Iqbal is a

debt slave and Ghullah is in charge of his life.

When Iqbal gets home from the carpet factory in the evenings, he collapses into bed and falls asleep. Sometimes Ghullah wakes him around midnight.

"We have a carpet delivery that has to be finished. Come on, get up."

The peshgi debt means that Iqbal has to go with Ghullah, who drags a sleepy

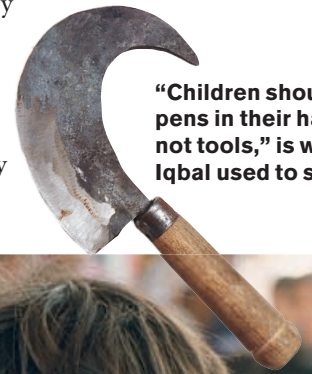
Iqbal through the narrow streets to the carpet factory. If Iqbal falls asleep at work, he is woken up by a blow from the carpet fork.

### Iqbal runs away

One day, a little boy in the carpet factory has a high fever. Ghullah, the owner, ties the boy's feet together and hangs him upside down from the fan on the ceiling.

"I'm the one who decides when you work," roars Ghullah.

In that instant, Iqbal decides he's had enough. He starts to run away from work as often as he can. Iqbal and his friends take the chance to run away when Ghullah isn't there. They



**"Children should have pens in their hands, not tools," is what Iqbal used to say.**

**Iqbal often spoke at meetings in front of adults and children.**





**Iqbal wanted to be a lawyer and free the children in the carpet factories.**

play all day without worrying about what awaits them.

The next morning, Ghullah comes to their homes to get them. He's furious, and he beats the boys with a carpet fork or whatever is within reach. Then he chains them up. Sometimes two days pass before he releases them again.

### Finally free!

Early one morning in October 1992, Iqbal runs away from work. He jumps onto the back of a tractor, where many adults and children are already sitting. One hour later, they arrive at a BLLF meeting.

This is the first time Iqbal sees the leader of BLLF,

Ehsan Ullah Khan. He listens with interest when Ehsan talks about the law against debt slavery. Ehsan asks Iqbal to tell the other children about his experiences. At first Iqbal doesn't dare, but then he steps up to the microphone.

Ehsan gives Iqbal a 'freedom letter'. On it is written the law that bans debt slavery and the sentence for people who use debt slaves. The problem in Pakistan is that people don't obey the law, and the police and courts often help factory owners rather than poor people.

Ghullah refuses to let Iqbal leave the carpet factory. But Ehsan doesn't forget the little boy, and he asks some of his colleagues to find out more and help Iqbal to freedom.

Iqbal is delighted to be able to start attending 'Our own school', as the BLLF school for former debt slaves is called. He tells his friends

and children in other carpet factories that they don't have to stay with their owners any longer. In the Muridke area, children start leaving carpet factories in their hundreds and thousands. Iqbal speaks at meetings. He always ends his speeches by saying:

"We are..."

And all the children respond:

"FREE!"

### Iqbal threatened

Iqbal now lives in Lahore with BLLF. The first time he comes home to visit, Ghullah the owner of the carpet factory says:

"You have to come back to work. Then the other children will come back too."

But Iqbal refuses.

Another carpet maker threatens Iqbal's mother. He says he'll kidnap her and Iqbal if Iqbal doesn't return to work or pay off the debt that made him a debt slave.

A third carpet maker says to Iqbal's little sister Sobia:

"Your brother walks about like a judge in the streets when he comes home. But one day we'll get him."

"Shut up old man," says Sobia, who has never dared to be rude to an adult before.

"Watch out or we'll kill you too," replies the carpet maker.

### Iqbal murdered

In October 1994, Iqbal visits Sweden. He tells school children about how life is for debt slave children in Pakistan. Many newspapers write about him, and he is featured on lots of TV programmes. In December

**Iqbal was beaten with a carpet fork and chained up when he tried to escape, but he still kept trying.**

**Iqbal with one of his many friends in Sweden.**



This is an extract from the comic strip "Iqbal, the little carpet boy" by Magnus Bergmar and Jan-Åke Winqvist. You can read the entire comic strip at [www.worldschildrensprize.org](http://www.worldschildrensprize.org).



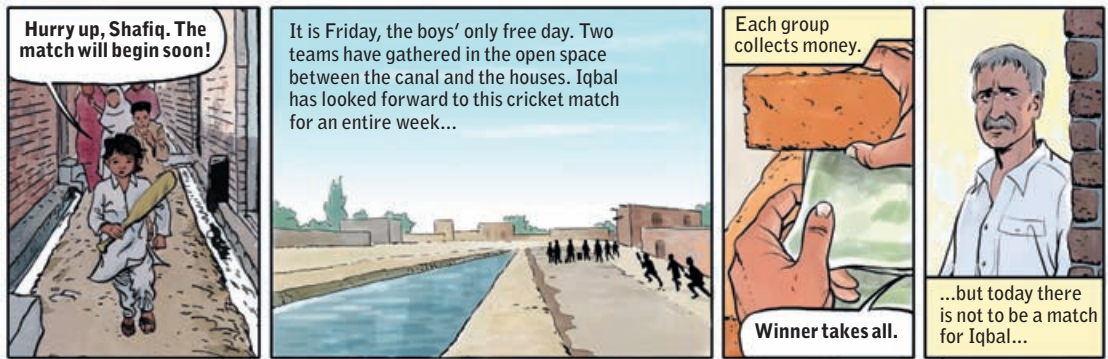
Iqbal warms up with a scarf at school in the winter.

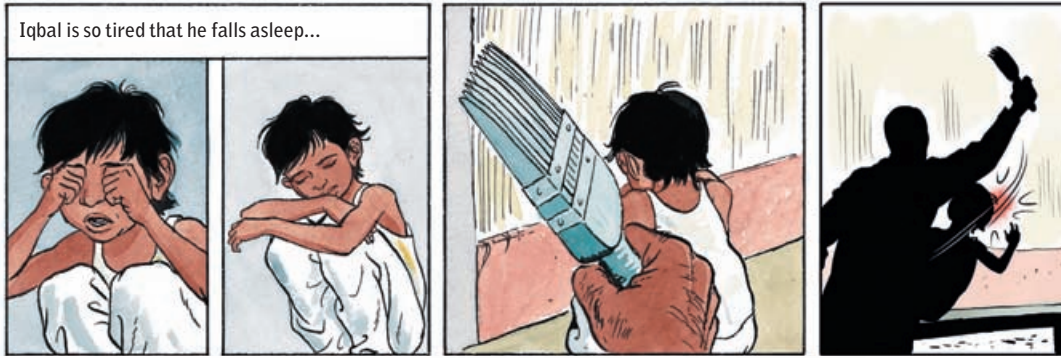
1994, Iqbal flies to the USA, where he is given an award by Reebok for fighting for the rights of debt slave children. Iqbal is also 'Person of the week' at one of the USA's largest TV companies.

Iqbal returns to Pakistan. On the morning of Easter Sunday, 16 April 1995, he takes the bus home to Muridke. That evening he joins his relatives Lyaqat and Faryad Masih, who are taking food to Lyaqat's father who is watering his fields. All three of them sit on the same bike.

It is eight o'clock and it's dark. When the boys are half way there, they hear two gunshots, which kill Iqbal.

Faryad can't write, so on the night of the murder, he has to put his thumbprint at the bottom of a blank piece of paper. Then the police write whatever they like and claim that Faryad has signed the paper to say that it is true.





Iqbal is so tired that he falls asleep...

The next morning, a poor farmer called Ashraf Hero is arrested and accused of murdering Iqbal. The police torture him. They hang him upside down from the ceiling and beat him with sticks and leather belts.

“You’re going to say that you killed that boy Iqbal and say whatever we tell you to. Or else we’ll kill you and your whole family. You’re poor and worthless. No one cares what we do with you,” say the police.



The next morning Ghullah gets Iqbal at his home...

As punishment for running away, the children are chained...

### The lie spreads

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan confirms that the police report is correct and that Hero, an innocent man, is the murderer. As a result the lie is spread all over the world by ambassadors and journalists, without being questioned. The Human Rights Commission also claims, without proof, that the murder is nothing to do with the fact that Iqbal challenged the carpet makers.

Hero is kept out of the way. No one is allowed to meet him. But in court he is found not guilty.



Iqbal thinks constantly about how hard his life is, but he can't think of a way to be free...

All the boys in the factory are debt slaves. None of them have a peshgi, which is what the debt is called, less than when they started to work for Ghullah. After five years in the carpet factory it would become even worse for Iqbal...

The police write that Hero, who has never before held a rifle, just happened to hit Iqbal when he fired in the general direction of the boys. In actual fact, Iqbal was hit by 120 pellets on his back, while the other boys were only hit by a total of two pellets. It was Iqbal who was the murderer’s target, and he was shot in the back when he tried to escape.

“Iqbal told me that he wanted to be a big lawyer,” recalls Sobia, who was ten when her big brother was murdered. “He wanted to free the children in the carpet factories and give them an education so that poor children could have a better future.”



One day a man comes by and speaks with the carpet slaves...

**My name is Yousof! The peshgi debt which makes you slaves is unlawful. Follow with me to a meeting of the Bonded Labour Liberation Front, BLLF tomorrow and you will learn more.**

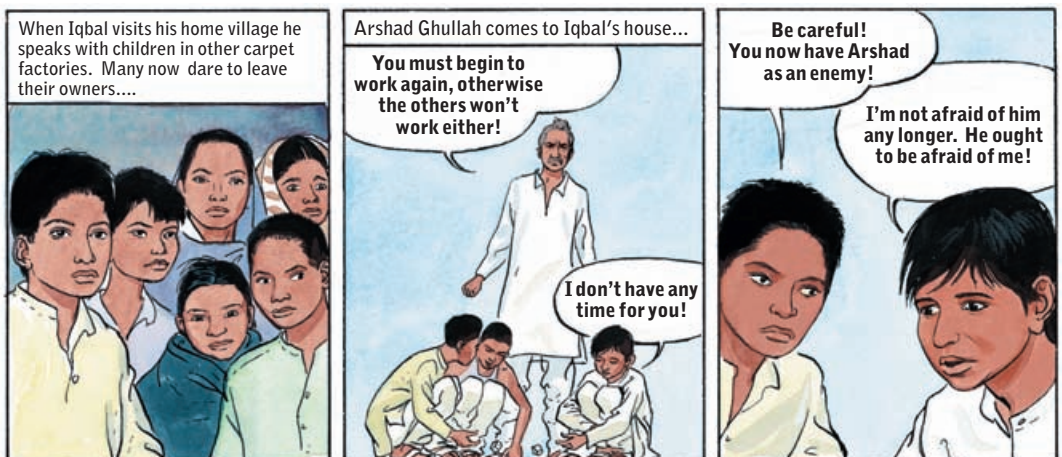
**Look out!**  
The owner is coming!

**You know what will happen to you if you leave your work!**

Iqbal ignores his owner's warning and takes part in the meeting...

Say, didn't I see you yesterday?

Yes...



When Iqbal visits his home village he speaks with children in other carpet factories. Many now dare to leave their owners....

Arshad Ghullah comes to Iqbal's house...

**You must begin to work again, otherwise the others won't work either!**

I don't have any time for you!

**Be careful! You now have Arshad as an enemy!**

I'm not afraid of him any longer. He ought to be afraid of me!





# Modern day slaves

There are around 240 million working children between the ages of 5 and 14 in the world today. Three in four of them carry out harmful child labour, the kind of work that prevents children from going to school and destroys their health and development. More than 8 million children are forced into the worst kinds of child labour, as debt slaves, soldiers or prostitutes. Every year, at least 1.2 million children are 'trafficked' in the modern day slave trade.

Iqbal was a modern day child slave. There are child slaves in countries like Pakistan, India, Nepal, Cambodia and Sudan, as well as in Europe. Most of these are debt slaves, but there are other kinds of slaves, like the girls in West Africa who are household slaves. You are a modern day slave if your employer has so much power over you that you have to work for him or her. Pakistan, like most other countries, has laws that ban both debt slavery and child labour. But often these laws are not enforced. The countries that have child slaves have all ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and are supposed to protect their children from having to carry out work that is harmful for them. 🌐

