

Hauling gravel: Daily toil for Myanmar boy, 11

By Esther Htusan
The Associated Press

YANGON, Myanmar — Early every morning, 11-year-old Chit Toke wakes up in the small bamboo shack beside a creek where his family lives. In the near distance, he can see new high rises springing up. He pulls on oversized green trousers — part of a cast-off school uniform — and walks over to the river where boats are docked. They are waiting for laborers to unload gravel collected from river beds to supply the booming construction industry in Yangon, the biggest city and commercial capital of Myanmar, also known as Burma.

Chit Toke joins the queue of workers, seeking to earn enough to help feed his family by hauling baskets full of stones, each weighing more than 42 pounds, from boat to shore. If he can haul that basket 100 times each day over a 100-foot path, he can earn 3,500 kyats (\$3.70).

Child labor remains widespread in Myanmar as the country tries to rebuild its economy after five decades of military misrule. More than one-third of Myanmar's children between the ages of



seven and 16 work, according to the United Nations. Chit Toke's family moved to the city after Cyclone Nargis ripped through the Irrawaddy Delta farming region in 2008.

"When we were hit by the cyclone, we had no hope and everything was gone. We could barely survive and I had to work from an early age, as my father had died,"

the boy recalls.

He has been doing this backbreaking labor for almost four years. "When I first worked here, I felt really tired. My shoulders were really painful at night and my legs, too," Chit Toke says.

He lifts a cane basket filled with gravel onto one shoulder and gets his balance, so that he can safely walk barefoot over

GRUELLING GIG. Chit Toke, foreground, is helped by his mother to lift a basket of gravel weighing about 42 pounds in a barge anchored on the banks of the Yangon River. A worker receives 35 Kyats (3.7 U.S. cents) for hauling a basket full of gravel from a boat to shore, walking a distance of about 100 feet on a narrow timber beam. Early every morning, 11-year-old Chit Toke wakes up in the small bamboo shack where his family lives besides a creek. In the near distance, he can see new luxury high rises springing up. (AP Photo/Gemunu Amarasinghe)

narrow wooden planks that connect the boat to land. Each time he dumps his rocks on a pile to be hauled away by trucks, he receives a chit to show he has hauled one basket's worth. Each chit can be exchanged for 35 kyats (3.7 U.S. cents). He collects the chits in a small plastic bottle tied to his waist.

An eight-year-old friend also works here. But some children are more fortunate. Each morning, he sees some of the neighborhood kids head to school in their uniforms.

"I want to go to school with him," he says, putting his arm around the shoulders of one of them, his best friend, Myo Oo. "But I cannot go because I cannot afford to go to school. I have to work."

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