

VERMONT

Sanders praises child labor law

By Robert Benincasa

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Rep. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., claimed "a major step forward" in his fight against international child labor exploitation Wednesday, with the enactment of a U.S. ban on products made by children in forced labor.

Sanders wrote the child labor amendment, which was part of a \$24.7 billion U.S. Treasury spending bill signed by President Clinton last week. He said he and Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, met with U.S. Customs officials recently and were assured the law would be enforced.

"We as Americans who are consumers should not be purchasing products made by children who are living as virtual slaves," he said. "It's just wrong. We

should not be encouraging the continuation of that type of labor arrangement. Children should be in school. Children should be free. Children should not be chained to looms, working 70 or 80 hours a week."

Sanders said there are an estimated 15 million indentured child laborers in southern Asia, some as young as 4 years old. He said children's rights groups estimate the United States imports more than \$100 million of the products they make, including rugs, soccer balls and clothing.

Sanders said it's not possible for a consumer to tell if a product is made with child labor, except in the case of some carpets that bear a symbol certifying adherence to labor standards, so it will be up to Customs and child labor

advocacy groups to ferret out the products.

Terry Collingsworth, general counsel for one such group, the International Labor Rights Fund, said Wednesday that the new law will push companies to differentiate their products as child-labor free. "It's going to now significantly move industry toward a labeling system," he said.

Sanders also targeted Nike Inc. as an exploiter of cheap labor worldwide, and said he'll circulate a letter to Nike Chief Executive Phillip Knight, urging him "to stop exploiting the workers of China and Vietnam and Malaysia, who receive 20 cents an hour or less from Nike," and ask that Nike "start putting American workers back to work at decent wages.

"If our people are good enough to purchase the product then surely we are good enough to manufacture it."

In response, Nike labor issues spokesman Vada Manager said no one who makes Nike products earns 20 cents an hour, and no workers are supposed to exceed 60 hours a week. He also said no child laborers are making Nike products.

"The congressman ought to be aware, we do produce 50 (percent) to 60 percent of our apparel in the United States," Manager said, adding that only the footwear line is produced entirely in Asia. He said a \$135 pair of Air Jordan sneakers would cost more than \$200 if made in the United States, with all other factors, including Nike's profit, being equal.