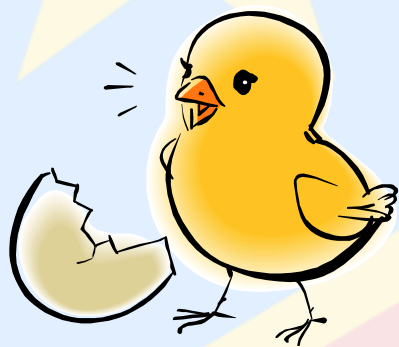




FREE THE CHILDREN JAPAN

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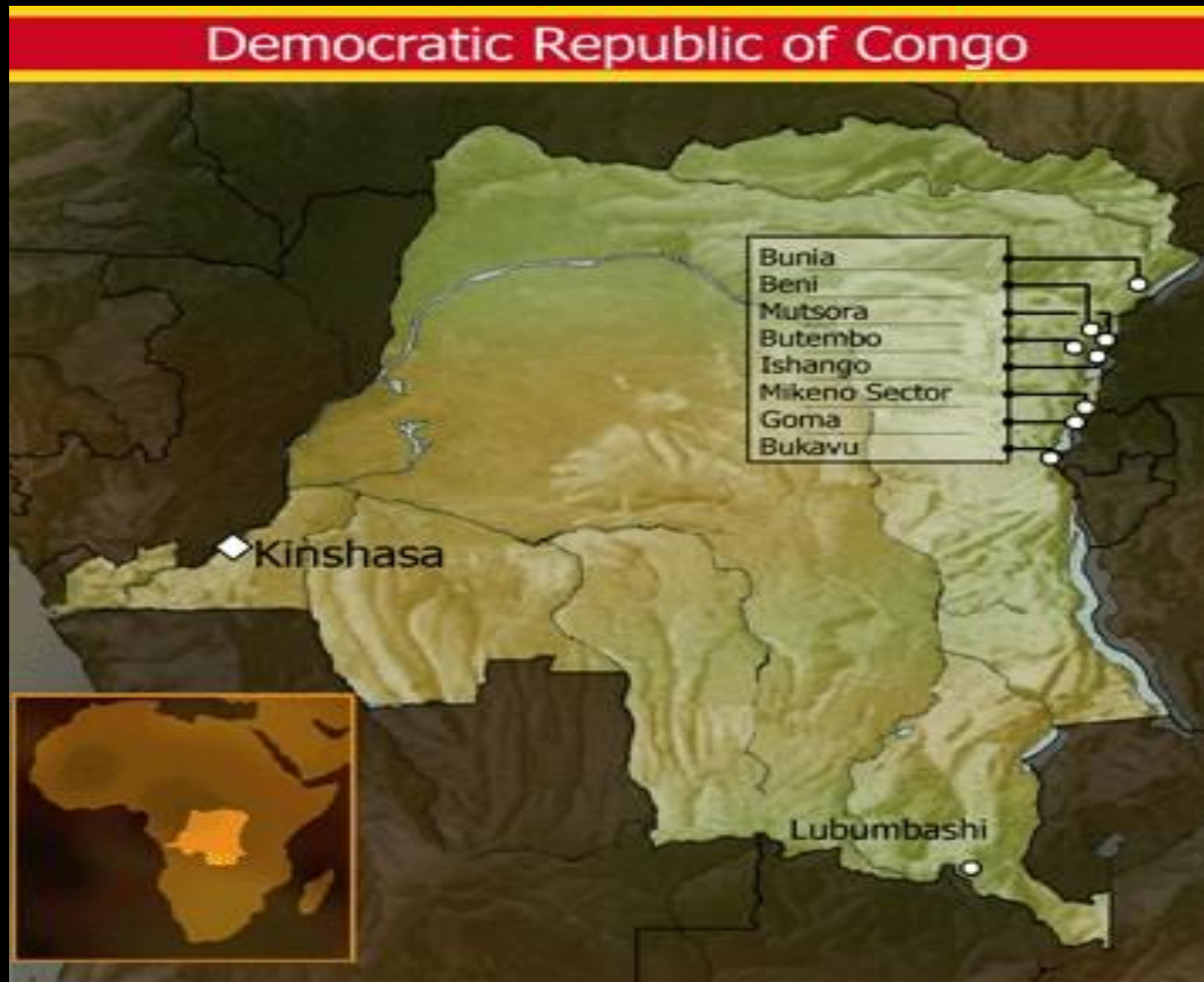


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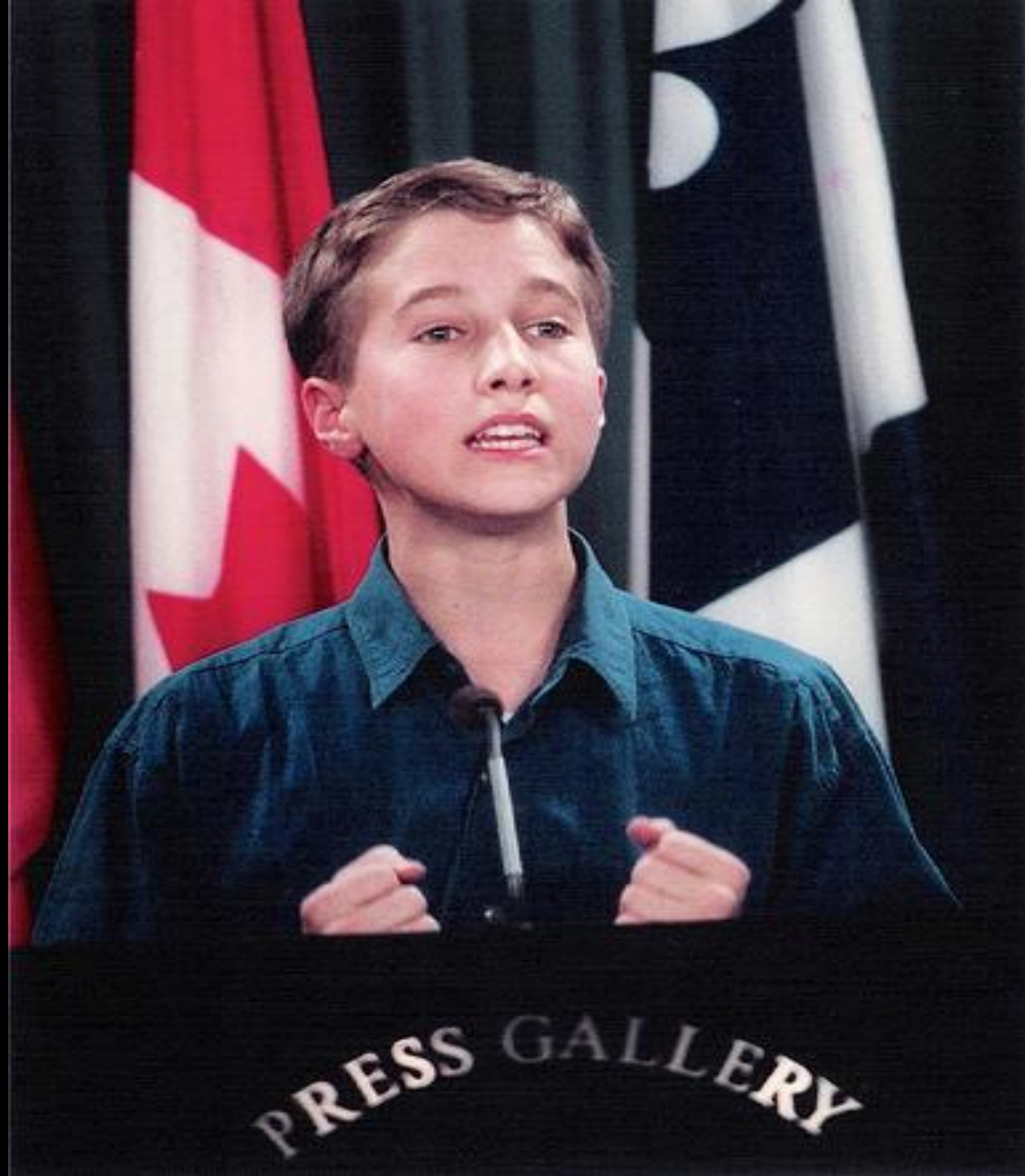






國際連合難民高等弁務官事務所







IQBAL MASIH: Shown getting an award in Boston last year for youth work.

Battled child labor, boy, 12, murdered

Defied members of 'carpet mafia'

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan (AP) — When Iqbal Masih was 4 years old, his parents sold him into slavery for less than \$16.

For the next six years, he remained shackled to a carpet-weaving loom most of the time, tying tiny knots hour after hour.

By age 12, he was free and travelling the world in his crusade against the horrors of child labor.

On Sunday, Iqbal was shot dead while he and two friends were riding their bikes in their village of Muritke, 35 kilometres outside the eastern city of Lahore. Some believe his murder was carried out by angry members of the carpet industry who had made repeated threats to silence the young activist.

lence the young activist.

"We know his death was a conspiracy by the carpet mafia," said Ehsan Ullah

man of the Bonded Labor Liberation Front (BLLF), a private

the-
in Pakistan.

Iqbal, a Christian, was home from school in Lahore for the Easter holiday.

A man known only as Ashraf, a laborer in Muritke, was arrested in connection with the shooting, but has been released, Khan said.

Rana Iqbal, deputy superintendent of police for the district, said yesterday he was investigating the shooting but had no details. The killing came only months

☞ Please see Child-labor, A24

Child-labor 'activist slain for defying 'carpet' mafia

☞ Continued from A1

International attention. At a labor conference in Stockholm, last November, he spoke about the horrible conditions faced by child workers, who toil for long hours in unsafe conditions and earn as little as one rupee — three cents — a day.

"We had to get up at 4 and work 12 hours," Iqbal told the conference, barely tall enough at the time to peer over the podium. "We were chained to the looms, but after work, we were usually released and could go home to sleep."

When he was 10, Iqbal contacted the BLLF and was able to escape from the factory. He still owed his boss 13,000 rupees — the equivalent of \$419 — a huge sum considering he earned only one rupee a day.

In December, Iqbal went to Boston to receive the Reebok Youth in Action Award from the American shoe company.

At the time, Iqbal said he wanted to become a lawyer and would use the \$15,000 prize money for school. Brandeis University in suburban Boston gave him a standing offer of a full scholarship.

A world of opportunity had suddenly opened up for Iqbal, who had begun to attend school in Lahore and boasted he had turned the tables on his old boss.

"I'm not afraid of him any longer. Now he's afraid of me," Iqbal said in an interview shortly before the Reebok award ceremony.

Carpet factory owners prefer children because their tiny fingers make the smallest, tightest knots

But Iqbal received repeated death threats from people in the powerful carpet-weaving industry. The latest was received just two weeks ago, said Khan, who travelled with Iqbal to Boston.

Khan said Iqbal's campaign against child labor had led to the closing of dozens of carpet-weaving factories in his district.

"He was so brave . . . you can't imagine," said Khan. "He

also has managed to free thousands of children."

Pakistan has an estimated 6 million child workers 14 years old or younger, according to the Human Rights Commission, an

in carpet factories, brick-making plants, on farms and as household servants.

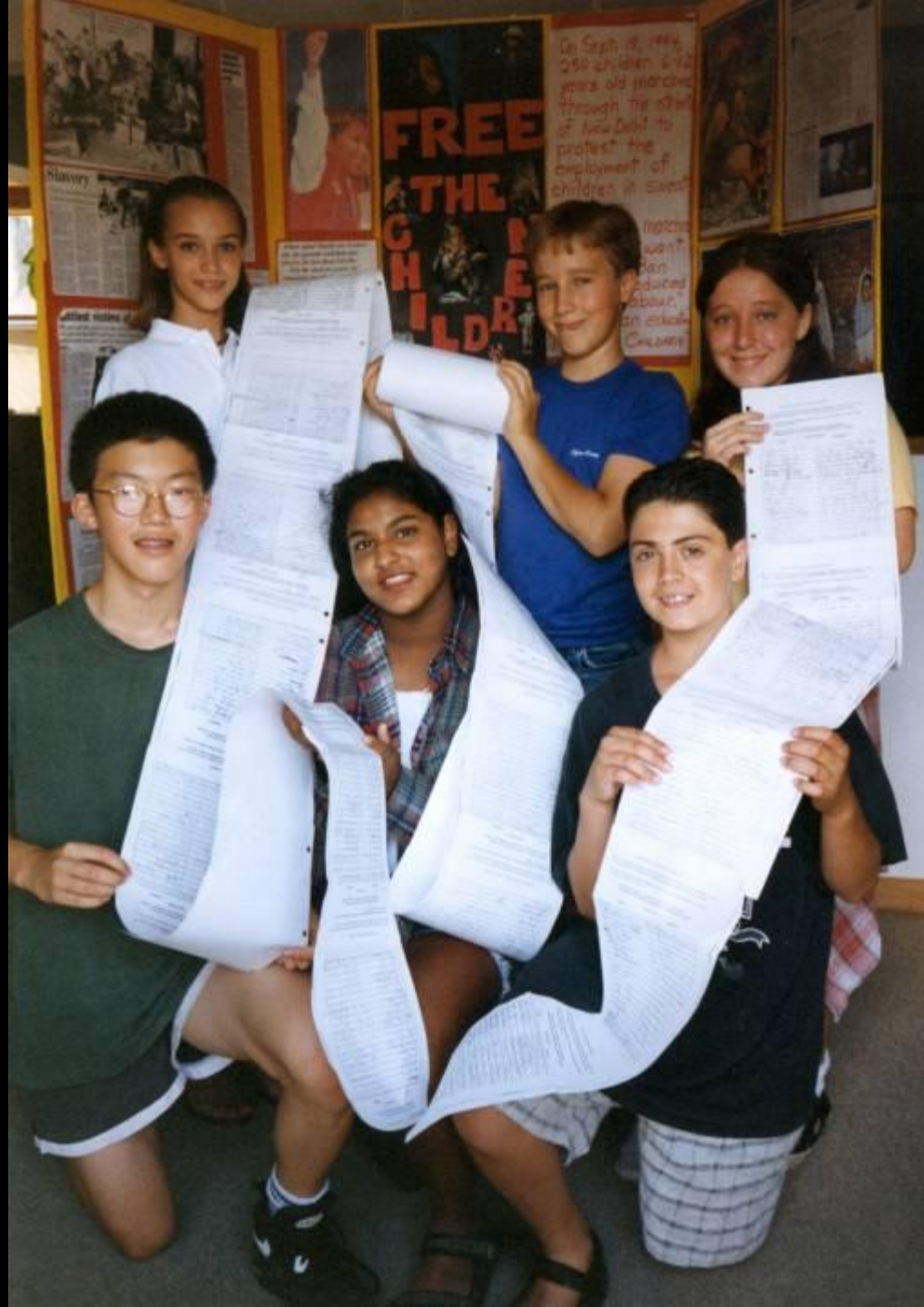
Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has vowed to fight child labor, but her government has taken only limited action. It faces powerful industries which argue that the impoverished country needs their export earnings from carpets and other goods sold a-

children because their tiny fingers make the smallest, tightest knots, and hence the best carpets.

Khan recalled his first meeting with Iqbal. He was emaciated and wheezing like an old man, cowering in the corner of a meeting hall where Khan had gathered local villagers to urge them to fight against forced labor.

"Iqbal was hiding himself. It was like he was trying to disappear. He was so frightened," he said.





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