

**We expose the filthy conditions where our eco-bags are made using child labour**



**SQUALOR:** Children work on a squalid 'green' bags, and inset, the bags we then use to carry our food home in

By Meg Milne

**CHILDREN** are being forced to work in horrific sweatshops in India to make millions of so-called environmentally friendly bags bound for our supermarkets.

An investigation by the Scottish Sunday Express has found trendy jute and cotton bags available in this country are produced in factories in Calcutta where working conditions are akin to those outlived in the UK more than 100 years ago.

Health and hygiene standards are poor and in many plants young children – some not even in their teens – have no choice but to work for long hours for a pittance.

At primitive work benches cotton and jute bags are sewn with the seams inside which means human hands and feet, have to work inside the bag.

The conditions are, at times, inhumane and insanitary. For consumers in Scotland there are fears this type of production can pose a serious health risk since the bags' intended use is to carry food home from the supermarket.

In the street outside one Calcutta factory – where temperatures hover between 37 degrees and 42 degrees – cows wander freely leaving piles of

# Are you carrying a sweatshop bag when you go to the supermarket?

**“If they were hygienically made I'd buy them, but they are not.”**

manure. And barefoot staff have to walk through the muck to get to the wash-room-free factory.

Worse still, 90 per cent of the country's population has no access to a toilet, though the local health minister does hope to reduce the number to 50 per cent by 2012.

Businessman Neil Young, who runs a company that manufactures paper bags and supplies plastic bags throughout Britain, discovered the conditions after a fact-finding trip to India. While visiting the factories he took a shocking series of photographs inside the sweatshops.

He said yesterday: “I am not suggesting every single factory in India is like this, but I visited six and each was as bad as the next.

“The photographs were not taken surreptitiously, they were all taken quite openly.

“They show that these so-called environmentally friendly cotton and jute bags on sale in Scotland are often being made by children working in horrendous sweatshop conditions.

“Conservationists promoting these bags have no conception of the working conditions in which many are made.

“If they were hygienically made I would buy them myself, but they are not. They are a totally unacceptable product

and the people importing them here have no idea of how they are made.”

Mr Young, a director of Glasgow-based Simpac, added: “I saw workers use both their hands and feet inside the bags – and clean feet was not the phrase that sprung to mind.

“What people must realise is that the next time these bags are opened is here, to carry food.”

Mr Young was asked to make his fact-finding visits to Calcutta by a supermarket chain to investigate factory and work conditions in India.

His own firm, which was founded more than 100 years ago, supplies the retail industry, from major supermarket giants and high street department stores to small corner shops.

Mr Young has been instrumental in blocking controversial plans to outlaw or tax plastic carrier bags in Scotland, following a presentation to Holyrood's

Environment and Rural Development Committee. A number of campaigners and pressure groups have launched crusades to ban plastic bags, amid claims they cause damage to the environment.

But Mr Young said the cost of shipping the bulkier and heavier eco-bags is estimated at more than 66 times that of their plastic counterparts.

He said: “Apart from the conditions in which the [jute and cotton] bags are produced there is the carbon footprint they leave behind being transported around the world.

“Conservationists claim jute bags are better for the environment but a 20-foot container will only hold 30,000 of them.

“The same container can transport two million plastic supermarket checkout bags – with many ending up as part of 300,000 tonnes of plastic that is re-cycled into black bin bags every year at many UK plants, including one at Greenock.”



**INSANITARY:** Workers wade through muck to work on factory floor