Thousands of serfs in Southern Pakistan have recently sought to escape from their bondage and are attacking the country's biggest landlords who for centuries have treated them and their ancestors as mere slaves. Plantation workers, who have been bought and sold like animals, have been running away from the plantations and have been marching in the streets and attacking their masters. However, the richest landlords including some of the country's most powerful politicians are now striking back. Armed men are entering colonies of runaway serfs and are dragging them back to the plantations. Bonded laborers suspected of planning escape are reportedly being chained, tortured and killed.

Dexter Filkins, Los Angeles Times staff writer, quotes plantation owner, Ayaz Virk, as stating, relative to one of his escaped laborers, Chetan Baeel: "I bought that man. I paid the money, and I have a proper receipt. I could have sold him to someone else." Filkins states that he estimates that 20 million people, worldwide, toil including large portions of South Asia, where for years landlords have lent their workers money at very high interest rates and held them prisoner until the debts are repaid. Many workers are chained, night and day.

Filkins describes the owners as zamindars, but failed to describe how they obtained their huge land holdings. Originally, they were mere tax collectors, without the right of ownership over either the land or the serfs. But, they soon claimed title to the land in a procedure greatly expedited under the British rule of India, seeking to establish a land system similar to that of merry old England. The zamindars collected taxes for the British government in return for a status as actual owners.

Ghulam Rahim, a member of Pakistan's national assembly denied mistreating his workers, claiming, "It's a big lie. There is a conspiracy against the agricultural class... They are blackmailing us. They demand money and then they leave."

Landlords claim that this is a benign system which forces them to act like parents to their laborers through good harvests and bad. They say they pay for weddings, for medicine, and bail the workers out of jail and that if they did not lend money to their workers, they would not work.

40% of the arable land in Pakistan is owned by less than 1% of the landowners. One of wealthiest landholding families if that of ex Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Less than half the people of Pakistan can read or write, and reformers claim there are over 5,000 ghost schools, where no students study because landlord often pay teachers to stay home and work for them.

The revolt against the zamindars in West Pakistan began in the early 1990's when the Pakistani national assembly abolished bonded labor and imposed regulations on sharecropping.

Thousands of sharecroppers were set free, but the zamindars struck back. And a high ranking public administrator ordered police to stop raiding plantations. Mohammed Yamin Kahan, a deputy inspector general of police said, "I don't believe that bonded labor is a major problem here. The police have ignored hundreds of complaints about bonded labor.

Hundreds of bonded laborers have been brought back in chains by armed men hired by the zamindars, but the police have refused to arrest them. In some villages, landlords have a more difficult time reclaiming runaways as villagers have attacked landlord armed hoodlums with sticks and knives.

As grossly corrupt as Pakistani politics is, the treatment of serfs as slaves is apt to continue for a long long time.

In practically every country in Asia, landlords are kings and workers are their peons. But in most of those countries, the serfs have no place to go if they escape the plantations; so it is not necessary to keep them in chains.

There are large numbers of people who say, as they once did relative to the slaves in the United States, that the rights of those who have paid good money for land or people should be respected at all costs.