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Reebok hailed for releasing study of factory abuses

By Gregg Krupa
GLOBE STAFF

In an action praised by labor and human rights officials, Reebok International Ltd. yesterday released an independent study of two factories in Indonesia that documented substandard working conditions, including improper handling of hazardous wastes.

The report, prepared by a Jakarta-based research and consulting firm, Peduli Hak — which is Indonesian for “Caring for Rights” — said that the 10,000 workers in the two factories were not provided with basic information that would help them to collect overtime pay. They also were exposed to unhealthy conditions at their work stations, and women were subject to gender bias, the report said.

Having documented similar working conditions for years, labor and human rights activists lauded Reebok yesterday, saying the study's independence and the fact that the Stoughton-based shoe and apparel company made it public should serve as a model for other firms.

“If companies are going to think about truly independent studies of their overseas operations and taking real steps to improve the conditions of these workers, this is a useful example,” said Sidney Jones, the director of Human Rights Watch's Asian unit. “They asked the right questions, developed a useful methodology, and they've done it all with the fullest possible transparency and made the findings public.”

Reebok said that, based on the report, it already has pushed for improvements at the plants that cost \$500,000 to implement. The 14-month-long study included interviews with 950 workers.

Among the problems identified at the
REEBOK PLANTS

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Reebok releases study detailing abuses at factories in Indonesia

■ REEBOK

Continued from Page C1

Reebok-contracted plants were a lack of information for workers about work sheets, time cards, and pay stubs at both factories, PT Dong Joe Indonesia and PT Tong Yang Indonesia. Activists have complained for years that workers in the industry are prevented from collecting overtime.

The Indonesian researchers also cited improper conditions for disposing of chemical wastes and handling these materials; improper ventilation systems; poor seating at work stations; and a bias against women employees, especially as managers. Eighty percent of employees at the two factories are women.

Reebok says it has successfully pushed to provide for more communication with the workers, in part by allowing them to review their time sheets. New chairs have replaced problematic stools, and special equipment has been ordered for the handling of hazardous wastes, the company said. Reebok said it also is trying to break down cultural biases against women.

Unions, human rights groups, and student organizations have long been pressing apparel and shoe manufacturers to identify their contractors, disclose conditions, and open the plants for independent monitoring; and to pay the workers a living wage. The release of the independent Indonesian study of the Reebok plants comes two weeks after Nike Inc. disclosed names and locations of 41 overseas factories it uses. Nike has been under intense pressure by student activists who are pressing colleges to regulate production of licensed apparel bear-

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ing school names.

While praising Reebok's public disclosure of its report, some labor and human rights activists, including the Interfaith Coalition for Corporate Responsibility – a group of 275 religious organizations with more than \$100 billion in corporate investments – said Reebok should move quickly to provide better wages and to allow the workers to form unions.

“This is the company that moved to China and Indonesia to get away from union contracts,” said Jeff Ballinger, a consultant at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and a member of Press for Change, a group of activists that educates consumers on factory conditions in Asia. “They say that this is a communication problem. It's really a power distribution problem. These workers lack the power to represent themselves.”