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HEADLINE: Lawsuit claims young boys were forced to ride camels.

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BODY:

Thousands of young boys who claim they were enslaved by the rich rulers of the United Arab Emirates to labor as jockeys for the popular sport of camel racing have sued their alleged masters.

But not in Dubai, the crown jewel of the emirates. In Miami, a place often used to file exotic lawsuits.

The proposed class-action claims boys from 2 to 4 years old were allegedly abducted from South Asia and Africa -- then sold and enslaved to serve as camel trainers, tenders or jockeys for the wealthy elite in the United Arab Emirates. More than 30,000 boys could have been victimized in what the suit calls "one of the greatest humanitarian crimes of the last 50 years."

It accuses Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, the crown prince of Dubai, and his brother, Sheik Hamdan bin Rashid al Maktoum, the deputy ruler, of being "the most active participants" in the slave trade for camel racing.

"The defendants robbed parents of their children and boys of their childhoods, their futures and sometimes their lives, for the craven purposes of entertainment and financial gain," the suit said.

The Maktoum brothers, who were buying thoroughbred horses in Kentucky on Wednesday, could not be reached for comment.

Although the suit seems rather foreign even by Miami standards, the plaintiffs' attorneys say it was filed here in part because royal family members of the United Arab Emirates maintain hundreds of horses at farms in Ocala -- among their billions of dollars in U.S. assets. The case -- filed under an "alien tort" law adopted in 1789 to address injuries during acts of piracy -- could have been brought anywhere in the United States.

"There is no venue outside the United States in which the [boys] can possibly get redress for being trafficked internationally and enslaved," their attorneys wrote in court papers after announcing the suit Wednesday.

John Andres Thornton, a Miami Beach lawyer involved in the case, said the Maktoum brothers were served with court papers on Monday and Tuesday -- the Dubai crown prince during a thoroughbred horse auction in Kentucky and the other brother at the royal family's farm. Thornton declined to comment further late Wednesday.

The civil complaint, filed in Miami federal court last week, portrays the United Arab Emirates as a longtime hub for the slave trading of children for camel racing.

Lawsuit claims young boys were forced to ride camels. The Miami Herald September 14, 2006 Thursday

"Boys as young as 2 years old were stolen from their parents, trafficked to foreign lands, and put under the watch of brutal overseers in camel camps throughout the region," the suit said. "These claims are brought to punish the perpetrators and compensate the victims of child slavery and an international slave trade in small children that seems unimaginable in the 21st century."

It does not specify the amount of damages sought by the children and their parents. The complaint describes camel racing as a "favored Arab pastime for centuries," exploding in popularity as the Arabian peninsula's royal families acquired extraordinary wealth from oil riches.

Preadolescent jockeys weighing less than 44 pounds became the standard in racing for the past three decades, the suit says.

But there was a shortage of them, according to the complaint. Enter the illicit slavery market, which persisted in the United Arab Emirates throughout most of the 20th century.

"Because camel racing is extremely dangerous and arduous, especially for children, the Arab sheikhs would not make their own children jockeys and trainers," the suit said. "The sheikhs instead bought boys who had been abducted and trafficked across international boundaries."

"A vast conspiracy flourished among all the camel owners participating in the sport to buy boys in the slave trade, hold them in bondage in brutal camps in the desert while extracting their labor to care for and exercise the camels, and then race against each other on race days."

The suit accuses the Maktoum brothers as the main perpetrators of this "conspiracy."

It claims the boys were taken largely from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sudan and other countries -- some were sexually abused at desert camps, given limited food and sleep, and injected with hormones to prevent their growth.

"Sheikh Mohammed and Sheikh Hamdan treated their camels better than they treated their slave boys for the simple reason that the camels were far more valuable," the suit said.

The plaintiffs' attorneys cite a U.S. State Department report to support their claims.

In the Trafficking in Persons Report issued in June 2005, U.S. officials condemned the practice as "slavery." In a section on the camel jockeys, the report includes a picture with the caption: "Children trafficked to the Gulf states in the Middle East are forced to race camels for the entertainment of the elite. These children were training under the shadow of Dubai's skyline in early 2005."

Calls to the United Arab Emirates Embassy in Washington were not answered and there was no way to leave a telephone message after hours. A telephone message left Wednesday night at a Kentucky farm owned by Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum was not returned.

The Maktoums are heavily invested in U.S. horse racing and the crown prince owns Bernardini, the winner of the 2006 Preakness Stakes. They also own Dubai Ports World, which sought to operate seaport facilities in Miami and other U.S. cities until Congress raised terrorism security concerns and forced it to sell its interests to a U.S. buyer. They also control the Dubai Holding Co. and its subsidiaries, which own hotels, apartment buildings and healthcare facilities.

Information from the Associated Press was used to supplement this story.

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