LIBREVILLE, Gabon – Police in Gabon have rescued more than 140 children who had been trafficked from 10 different countries to work as forced labour in local markets, in an INTERPOL-led operation codenamed Bana.

Some 44 people were arrested in the operation, which took place from 9-11 December and was the first operation of its kind in Central Africa.

During the operation, teams of officials carried out checks at market stalls in the capital city Libreville, where children as young as six years old were working in a variety of roles, from carrying heavy goods, to selling products.

The children were taken into care following the operation which was led by police with support from a number of ministries including health, social affairs, work and foreign affairs, in addition to non governmental organizations and social workers.

Investigations are continuing and Gabon authorities have now pledged to carry out regular similar operations to identify and rescue children from forced labour and ensure they received the schooling they require.
“The success of this operation in identifying and rescuing children who were being forced to work is a strong start and Gabon’s decision to continue this work will lead to hundreds more children being saved,” said Jon Eyers, Assistant Director of INTERPOL’s Trafficking in Human Beings unit.

“Operation Bana clearly shows what can be achieved through the co-ordination of resources and support to assist national police in protecting children from trafficking and exploitation,” added Mr Eyers, whose unit has also co-ordinated similar operations in Burkina Faso in October, and in Côte d’Ivoire.

All three operations were conducted under the framework of INTERPOL’s programme of Operational Assistance, Services and Infrastructure Support (OASIS) to African police forces, funded by Germany. It aims to help countries in Africa develop a global and integrated approach to fighting 21st century crime by developing operational capacities for policing in the region and enhancing the ability of INTERPOL member countries to tackle crime threats nationally, regionally and globally.

Prior to operation Bana, training workshops had been organized by INTERPOL at its Regional Bureau in Cameroon and at the National Central Bureau in Libreville to ensure that officers on the ground are trained in a range of skills including specialist interview techniques.