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Thousands Dying From Chronic Renal Insufficiency In Nicaragua; Agrochemicals Suspected But Not Proven

by Mike Leffert

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About 160 km northwest of Managua lies the town of Chichigalpa, where some 2,000 people suffer from chronic renal insufficiency (CRI). The disease is eventually fatal. This is sugarcane country. The CRI sufferers are current and former employees of two sugar mills.

During the past 30 years, says a workers' group, more than 560 employees of just one of the mills have died of the condition. The mills, San Antonio and Monterrosa, deny responsibility for the illnesses. Most people in the area agree that the cause is chemicals used in the fields, but the mills contend that no scientific proof has been presented in any of the workers' lawsuits brought against them. Successive Nicaraguan governments have acknowledged the lack of scientific evidence.

The local causes of CRI are officially unknown. The current government, however, runs a CRI unit at the Julio Duran Zamora Health Center in Chichigalpa. Nephrologist Edwin Reyes of the Ministry of Health has been monitoring the situation for ten years. The figure of 2,000 people affected is an increase from 800 in 2004, when he began to count cases. Reyes told El Nuevo Herald newspaper in Miami that neither the government nor the mills have investigated the causes of the disease. "I don't understand why not," he told the reporter.

Fired, bereft, and left to die

Apart from the clinic, the CRI sufferers get little support. The mills fire them without pension or compensation as soon as they become too weak to work or, with the help of science, even earlier. Since the 1990s, San Antonio has tested its workers for kidney malfunction and routinely fires anyone showing signs. Dr. Alejandro Marin, director of San Antonio's workers hospital, confirmed these practices. Juan Salgado of the organization Asociacion Chichigalpa por la Vida (Asochivida) said of this practice, "We worked for them all our lives, and they threw us out on the street when they discovered we were sick, the way the Romans did with their slaves after they were no longer useful." Salgado also has CRI.

Faced with these conditions, the local population pressed the Asamblea Nacional (AN) to pass a law classifying CRI as an occupational disease, creating eligibility for government disability payments. San Antonio has, however, agreed to an out-of-court settlement of US\$2 million for victims in which the company denies responsibility for the sickness but makes "humanitarian payments."

Plaintiffs' lawyer Adrian Mesa said the settlement came out of a standoff wherein neither side could prove whether or not chemicals caused the disease. "We said, let's not talk about who is guilty. Let's look at this as a humanitarian issue, because what our clients need is money to cope with their disease," said Mesa. The humanitarian spin plays to the mill's strategy of denial of liability.

San Antonio's administrative director made that clear in a newspaper interview, when he told the reporter, "We have no responsibility. Yes, we have a social responsibility, and therefore we alerted the country's authorities that in the Occidente zone the problem of CRI was serious, but we have no direct responsibility as a cause of the illness whatsoever." He laid the cause up to some as yet unknown problem of sanitation and called it a medical, not a labor, problem.

Cases building since the 1960s

Denis Melendez of the Centro de Informacion y Servicios de Asesoría en Salud (CISAS) traced the onset of the concentration of cases to the 1960s, when the cotton, cane, and banana industries all began to use synthetic agrotoxins. "There is strong contamination in the soils and bodies of water, and there is evidence of inventories of these products that are still exposed." Bermudez took exception to this assertion as well. He said San Antonio does not use any kind of insecticide, whether on a "bad list" or not. He said the company manages insects biologically with organisms produced in San Antonio's laboratory. CRI sufferer Carmen Rios told *El Nuevo Diario* that these statements may be true now, but the company has used Gramoxone, Randox, Fura Dan, Maduradores Defoliantes, Ansar, and others for a long time.

An upcoming suit alleges a causal relationship. The complaint said that the disease is caused "by being in contact, directly or indirectly, and without any protection, with chemical agents." But there is no proof here either. *El Nuevo Herald* sent a list of eight chemicals jointly identified by both sides to the Environmental and Occupational Health Department of the Public Health School at Emory University. Professor Chen-sheng Lu told the paper, "None of the herbicides that are being used by the sugarcane farmers would raise any red flag for health effects that the farmers are experiencing." But, he said, CRI could be the result of "interaction of different herbicides."

Determining that will be difficult, and no one so far has sought to try. Even establishing a statistical link between the chemicals and the disease has not been done. San Antonio's director Alvaro Bermudez enumerated some of the difficulties. He said that, while most of those affected were workers at the mill, it is also true that San Antonio is one of very few employers in the region; most of the population has worked there at one time or another. He interpreted this to mean, "Everyone who gets sick has in some way been linked to the San Antonio mill, not because we are the causers of the illness but because we're in the area where the problem exists."

A physician at the mill's hospital, Felix Celaya Rivas, noted that, while both men and women work at the mill and in the fields, few women have CRI. Further, the disease is reported elsewhere in Nicaragua, far from cane fields. But Reyes said that high incidences of CRI have been found in three other sugar mills in the country and in nonsugar agricultural areas. As facts and counterfactuals pile up, the need for a definitive study of the phenomena becomes more apparent, both to clarify the legal-liability questions and to get a handle on where this disease is coming from.

The victims and their families, however, have clearly moved on from the scientific uncertainties; they think they know what ails them and how to fix it. In March, dozens of former San Antonio and Monterrosa workers demonstrated in front of a Banco de América Central (BAC) branch to demand compensation for their disabilities. The Pellas family, thought to be Nicaragua's richest, owns

BAC and San Antonio. Alvaro Gonzalez, president of the Asociacion de Afectados de Insuficiencia Renal Cronica del Ingenio Monterrosa (ASOTRAIR), said affected people from both mills had banded together to demand that the Pellas family, at a minimum, put together a commission to start conversations about compensation.

A 2006 report on CRI patients from the Centro de Salud de Chichigalpa said that there are 3,200 patients with the diagnosis in the area, as many as 80% in Chichigalpa, the rest spread through the municipalities of El Viejo, Chinandega, Posoltega, El Sauce, Somotillo, Leon, Malpaisillo, Bluefields, and Matagalpa. As of March 2005, 1,007 had died from the disease. The registry of ASOTRAIR put the number of deaths as of February 2007 at 2,417. Meanwhile, the workers continue to live in misery, to bury their dead, and to beget more dead.

The case of Hermogenes Martinez of Chichigalpa is exemplary. He died in June. A recipient of San Antonio's humanitarian aid, he had received the equivalent of 16 months salary, US\$850. As a cane cutter, he made an average of US\$1.80 a day. He left eight children and a widow, Candida Reyes. She said two of their grown children, Henry and Liliana, now have CRI. Her younger brother died of it. Another brother has CRI and is confined to a wheelchair. Four other half siblings also have it.

The story is no better at the other mill, Monterrosa. About 300 former workers there say they were fired after blood tests showed their kidneys were failing. They have been protesting at the company's gates for months, demanding compensation. Since 2000, this mill has been owned by Pantaleon, a Guatemalan group. One of the protesters at the gate is Veronica Medrano, widowed by CRI four years ago and left with 11 children and a shack to house them. When her husband Juan Senon Bartodano died, there was no compensation, no pension.

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