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Anti-slavery Efforts in Brazil Hampered

by LADB Staff

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In Brazil today, at least 25,000 slaves labor under inhuman conditions. The real number may be double that. They clear the Amazon of its jungle cover for ranchers; they make pig iron in charcoal smelters for the US and international markets. Slavery flourishes in Brazil despite efforts of the government of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to free these people and prosecute those who enslave them. These are the findings of an as-yet-unpublished report of the Geneva-based International Labor Organization (ILO).

Brazil also fosters practices "analogous to slavery" by tolerating sweatshops in Sao Paulo where men, women, and children toil to produce cheap clothing. These workers are illegal immigrants from Bolivia, Peru, and Paraguay who work under threat of deportation to even worse economic conditions at home.

The report providing this information was leaked to The Guardian of London by anti-slavery campaigners who fear that it is being suppressed to cover up ILO failures to act against the situation, and because the US directly benefits from the products of slavery. Ninety-two percent of the pig iron produced at smelters in the forest is exported to the US. This, says the report, violates Section 307 of the US Tariff Act of 1930, expressly prohibiting the "import of merchandise that has been produced in whole or in part with prison labor, forced labor, or indentured labor in the penal system."

Other slave-produced products not mentioned in the report, but which find an eager market in the US, include Brazilian hardwoods, especially so-called Brazilian cherry (Jatoba) and Brazilian walnut (ipe). These account for as much as 5% of the wood flooring and decking sold in the US. ILO officials deny withholding the report.

Rather, said Roger Plant, head of the organization's forced-labor program, it had been held back for updating and would be published next year. "It is a good report and full of insights and useful information," said Plant. "It is certainly food for thought for the Department of Homeland Security and the US Customs Service, which has made much of preventing the import of goods made by child labor but is only sleepily invoking the Tariff Act as far as adult slaves are concerned."

Softening the harsh numbers,

Plant added that Peru and Bolivia also have slaves and the Lula government took office with a promise to end slave labor. The government has so far freed 5,400 slaves and paid them compensation. The author of the report, Jan Rocher, however, told The Guardian, "After a good start cracking down, the government has given in to the landowner's lobby pressure in congress to delay

a bill that would confiscate their estates when slave labor has been found, in exchange for their votes on other bills.

As the report pointed out, the scandalous fact is that many federal congressmen and regional politicians have been found using slave labor on their cattle ranches so some of the men who got the law postponed are those who personally benefit from the delay."

The life

The slaves producing iron live in hovels without sanitation, under plastic sheets. They work sometimes seven days a week in the extreme heat of the smelters without protective clothing from morning till night. Those clearing land for cattle or soybean production work under armed guard to prevent escape, even if that were possible in the remote jungle locations. There is no transport. Those who attempt escape on foot are hunted down and beaten. In the south of the state of Para, 534 such workers were reported killed in a 30-year period until 2001, 26 times the national homicide average.

Many more have disappeared.

The Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, of the UN Commission on Human Rights' Subcommission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, produced its own report on the subject in 2004. This report said the Brazilian government "has shown a renewed commitment to tackling the issue." Lula has appealed to farm owners to cooperate with the state in combating slavery and has made a commitment to eliminate the practice by 2006. Slavery was outlawed in Brazil in 1888.

The government has also set up the National Commission for the Eradication of Slave Labor (CONTRAE), under which government departments, the federal police, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can work in coordinated fashion. Lula also launched the National Plan for the Eradication of Slavery, which proposes: 1. Improving the definition of slavery in Article 149 of the penal code. With legislative amendments to the code, those responsible for recruiting or transporting workers into slavery are subject to increased penalties.

The report criticizes the language of the amendments, however, because it may make prosecutions more difficult, and because minimum sentences (2 years) are shorter than the five-year minimum that had been expected. 2. Expropriation of slaver's property. The bill in congress since February allows expropriation without compensation, with the added benefit that the property would then be used for the government's agrarian reform program for freed slaves. This was deemed important in the report because 40% of those freed had been freed more than once. Providing land for them would reduce the probability of their falling back into these conditions. 3. Withholding access to public funds to slavers. A blacklist of individuals and companies would prevent them from getting public grants, credits, or other financial supports.

The list has been set up, but without needed systems to administrate it. Some progress The government seems to have made some headway against slavery. In 2000, 583 people were freed. In 2001 the number was 1433; in 2002, under Lula, 2306; in 2003 it more than doubled to almost 5,000, according to this report. Among the costs for the improvement, three labor inspectors were murdered on their way to inspect a farm in Minas Gerais state.

Local judges, prosecutors, and NGO workers have been threatened in Amazonia, but so far only the inspectors were killed. There had been worry that the killings and intimidation would slow anti-slavery efforts, but that does not appear to have happened. The main impediments to hastening the demise of this traditional mode of production are legislative reluctance in Brazil and lack of will to act in the US, both on the part of government and in the private sector.

Executives of US companies contacted by Knight Ridder said either they were unaware their products were made by slaves, they had contracts ensuring humane conditions with Brazilian suppliers, or they didn't consider the issue a problem. Dan DiMicco, president and CEO of Nucor, a US company that buys pig iron from Ferro Gusa do Maranhao, a company linked to slave labor by government inspectors, said, "We're not familiar with it. It's something for the Brazilian government to handle. Nucor doesn't have the ability to influence the issue."

Similar statements came from ConAgra Foods, a buyer of Brazilian beef, whose spokesperson said they were "several steps removed" from the issue, and Cargill Inc, where the rationale was that they had "limited leverage" over Brazilian soybean farmers.

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