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Bound by Promises



Contemporary Slavery in Rural Brazil

Partner: Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) & Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL)

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"Forced labor cannot be equated simply with low wages or poor working conditions. Nor does it cover situations of pure economic necessity, as when a worker feels unsafe to leave a job because of the real or perceived absence of employment alternatives. Forced labor represents a severe violation of human rights and restriction of human freedom.... Many victims enter forced labor situations initially of their own accord, albeit through fraud and deception, only to discover later that they are not free to withdraw their labor. They are subsequently unable to leave their work owing to legal, physical, or psychological coercion."

- International Labor Organization (ILO), A Global Alliance Against Forced Labor Report, 2005.

Watch a 4 min excerpt of the video above and **ACT NOW** by telling President Lula that slavery must end for once and for all.

Contemporary Slavery in Rural Brazil

Today, it is estimated that there are at least 25,000 workers enslaved every year in rural Brazil, predominantly in the Amazon region. Mostly men between the ages of 18 and 35 years, these workers are trafficked routinely by middlemen who recruit in towns throughout the north and northeastern states, where poverty and unemployment offer no other choices to make ends meet. At first, it seems like a fair agreement. The middleman needs workers to do a job on a ranch, and he promises good pay for hard work. He sometimes even offers advances and transportation to the ranch. Knowing that there are no other options and eager to work, men take the job with the hope of bringing some money to their families. The middleman piles the workers onto trucks and often takes their documents, saying he needs them to legalize their work status. Not knowing exactly where they are going, the workers travel for days and end up on isolated ranches in remote areas, sometimes only accessible by plane. Once there, the middleman's promises prove to be false - the workers are enslaved. They will have neither the money, nor the means to leave. Listen the workers' stories in the 4 min excerpt of the video.



Debt Bondage

As soon as they arrive at a ranch, the middleman informs the workers

that him owe them for the transportation, food and lodging costs incurred throughout the journey. The workers also will have to purchase food, clothes, and any other necessities from the ranch's "shop," which charges inflated prices. They must even buy tools such as hoes, axes, boots, and gloves needed for the jobs they will do, such as clearing pastures for cattle raising, harvesting sugar cane, producing charcoal, or planting soy. Every so often, they will settle expenses: the middleman will calculate how much the worker earned and how much he owes to the ranch. If the balance is negative, he must keep working to pay it off. Stranded in the middle of nowhere, the workers have no choice but to toil in hope of buying back their freedom.

Degrading Conditions

Every day, the men wake up at the crack of dawn and begin their day with a meager breakfast before setting out to work. They bathe and wash their clothes in pools used by the wild animals on the ranch. Their drinking water also comes from these pools, often kept in old rusty containers full of bugs and larva. Day in and day out, they do backbreaking work and survive on rice and beans - if they have enough for everyone. Medical care is nonexistent and workers have reported that even in cases of severe diseases or injury, they are often left to fend for themselves. Cramped in shacks made of plastic sheets and woven leaves from the forest, workers often reported that "in a space for 5 or 6 people, [the ranchers] wanted to put 13, 14, 15 of us by layering the hammocks over each other."

Isolation, Threats and Intimidation

As their debt increases, the men continue to work to pay it off. Often left with no documents and no money, they have no way to get home. They often do not even know where they are, and the ranch may not even be accessible by roads. Without documents, they cannot work and government inspectors or trade unions do not know they exist. Armed guards threaten and intimidate them, sending the message that those who try to run away may be killed. Running away to the next town may only make things worse since local authorities often have strong ties to landowners. In the past, there have been reports of local police taking runaway workers back to ranches. Since federal authorities have little physical presence in remote areas of the Amazon region, landowners can exploit the workers to the extreme in the middle of the forest.

Brazil's Response to Slavery

In 1989, at the age of 17, "José Pereira" became enslaved at a ranch in the south of the state of Pará. As he and his friend tried to escape, armed guards fired several shots at them. His friend died immediately, but José pretended that he was dead and was later found by neighbors who saved his life. After 4 years in Brazil's sluggish judicial system, **José Pereira's case** reached the Organization of American States in 1993, bringing national and international attention to contemporary slavery in rural Brazil. Two years later, Brazil officially recognized the existence of slavery and created the Mobile Inspection Squads to investigate cases.

Based on a complaint filed by a runaway slave, the Mobile Inspection Unit sets out to inspect the ranch, often located in a remote and inhospitable area. By the time they reach the ranch, landowners' gunmen may have been tipped off and try to hide the workers or impede the Squad from entering the ranch. Successful raids inspect ranches, impose fines on landowners, distribute unpaid wages, and release workers from slavery. Read "**The Hunt for Slave Outposts in the Amazon**", a story in the Christian Science Monitor on how the Mobile Inspection Squad works. Since its inception in 1995 through 2006, these operations have released roughly 22,000 slaves at approximately 1,500 ranches. While these efforts rescue the worker, it is only the starting point, and many other efforts are needed to end slave labor (see "Moving Towards Eradicating Slavery" below).

Globalization and Slavery in Rural Brazil

Inspectors on the Mobile Squads often describe finding that the livestock on the ranches are treated better than the workers. Most of the ranches that use slave labor are high-end businesses that use state-of-the-art technology, where the cattle are given routine veterinary care and special diets to ensure the ranch produces export quality meat.

Brazil is a major exporter, and the fruits of slave labor end up in other countries in the form of steel, meat, soy and other products - making



slave labor in the Amazon region a global issue. Roughly 60% of slave labor cases found are in cattle raising activities, 9% in logging and 18% in agricultural products such as cotton, soy and sugar cane (**Comissão Pastoral da Terra - CPT**). Although only 13% of cases of slavery are reported in the charcoal production industry, this portion is very relevant because the charcoal is used to produce pig iron, which in turn is used to produce steel. Brazil produces the highest quality pig iron in the world, most of which feeds into the U.S. steel industry and represents a market worth over 400 million dollars a year. Learn more about U.S. corporations' connection to slavery in "**Slaves in the Amazon Forced to Make Materials Used by GM**" by Bloomberg.

As many of these exports get mixed in with commodities produced by legal workers, it is almost impossible to know which shipment has traces of slave labor by the time it reaches other countries. However, it is possible to identify companies that do import products from areas where slave labor is widespread and pressure them to ensure their production chain does not involve slave labor.

Moving Towards Eradicating Slavery

In 2003, Brazil launched the "**National Plan to Eradicate Slave Labor**". Comprised of 76 bold measures to end slavery by the end of 2006, roughly 60% of this plan has been implemented, but there are several pressing measures that still remain on paper and must be implemented to truly eradicate slave labor:

Increase the capacity of Mobile Inspection Squads

Today, the Mobile Inspection Squads continue to be the workers' first and foremost hope to be freed and seek justice. Although the number of workers released has increased significantly since 2003, half of the complaints still remain uninvestigated. As these inspections play a pivotal role in any effort to repress and punish slave labor, more resources are needed to ensure all complaints are adequately investigated.

Pass the Constitutional Amendment 438

Since 1994, a Constitutional Amendment that would allow land to be confiscated - without compensation - from those practicing slavery has been blocked by powerful Members of Congress who have strong ties to landowners and sometimes may even have slaves themselves. For example, in 2004, slaves were found on Congressman Inoc?ncio Oliveira and Senator Jo?o Ribeiro's ranches.

End impunity of offending landowners

Although 4,000 enslaved workers are released each year, no landowner has ever been imprisoned for slavery. Although the Brazilian penal code establishes 2 to 8 years of jail time, a 2-year sentence can be converted into community service. In fact, the only landowner to ever have been condemned for slavery donated basic food packages to an NGO instead of serving jail time.

Decide whether state or federal courts can try slavery cases

The few criminal charges ever pressed against offenders often remain at a standstill while the judicial system debates whether they should be tried in state or federal courts. In the meantime, the statute of limitations runs out and the offenders can no longer be tried. In late 2006, a decision from the Brazilian Supreme Court held that cases may be tried in federal courts moving forward, but a firm policy is not yet in place.

Impose economic penalties

The judicial branch within the Ministry of Labor has issued significantly higher fines to offending landowners, and a public "List of Shame" with 159 names blocks offending landowners from receiving loans from public financing agencies, as well as some private banks. Also, over 100 companies have signed a "National Pact against Slave Labor," pledging to not buy products with slave labor in the production chain. Considered effective tactics, these efforts must be expanded and require close monitoring.

Expand income and employment generating opportunities

Since lack of economic opportunities forces workers into slavery, root causes such as poverty and unemployment must be tackled so that workers can make a living in their hometowns and do not need to migrate in search of jobs. Since half of Brazil's farmable land is owned by 3% of the country's population, it has also been suggested that confiscated land should be put towards the federal government's agrarian reform program.

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