

# **BRAZIL - Slave Labor Trades Faces**

Fabíola Ortiz

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April 28<sup>th</sup> 2014 - The proximity of great sporting events in Brazil paves a new path of slave labor among those who migrate from the rural interior to the urban centers in search of employment.

The dream of an honorable job attracts many migrants from poor regions in Brazil, including the neighboring countries, to try their luck in local metropolises and, on occasion, becomes a nightmare.

Slave labor was a persistent crime in rural areas, on the farm, sugar mills and carbon mining, but moved to the textile and clothing industry. Experts consulted by IPS agreed that the mutation hinders resistance and allegations.

Cícero Guedes survived several decades of labor in slave conditions, like other thousands of Brazilians from the country that move around the whole country and fall victim to forced labor.

During a meeting of the Rural Workers Without Land Movement (MST) he told IPS that, "I consistently worked hungry, without anything to eat. Nobody could stand working the whole day without eating. I sucked on sugarcane for lunch. I can still feel the agony. I worked on farms, mills, plants, and the pay was next to nothing."

Born in the north eastern state of Alagoas, Guedes began to work at age eight. Without any education, he ended up traversing the country to work in sugar cane plantations.

He said, "I worked. I worked and I couldn't see an escape. Slavery is when a person's dignity is disrespected and humiliated.

In 2002, thanks to the agricultural reform, he managed to settle down in the northern part of the state of Rio de Janeiro with his wife and three kids.

But on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January, 2013, Guedes was shot dead at fifty-eight years old near the sugar plant Cambahyba, in the northern township of Campos dos Goytacazes, in Rio de Janeiro. There the MST coordinated the occupation of a complex of seven sugar plantations of 3,500 hectares.

For almost twenty years, Brazil recognizes the existence of slave labor in its borders. It is formally called "Labor similar to slavery", because slavery, in essence, was abolished in Brazil in 1888.

Today it falls into abusive practices of enlistment which derive its bondage debts and suppression of liberty from serfdom.

"We are far from ending this problem and not just in Brazil (which made a big step in recognizing it). There are countries that don't recognize it and don't take measures to fight it", admitted Luiz Machado, national coordinator of the Special Plan of Action to Fight Forced Labor, of the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

In 1957 Brazil ratified the Covenant of Forced Labor of the ILO, along with committing to eradicate it and promote decent employment.

But only in 1995 this country created a public system to fight this crime. According to the Department of Labor, between 2012 and this year, 44,415 workers were rescued from slavery situations and the victims received approximately thirty five million dollars in indemnification. Since 2010, according to the

department, 2600 workers are rescued each year.

According to Machado, the United Nations (UN) is aware that this crime has skyrocketed in the setting of the FIFA World Cup, that will be celebrated in Brazil between June 12 and July 13, and the Olympic Games that Rio de Janeiro will host in 2016.

He explained that, "these great events attract workers and immigrants to construct stadiums. There is also a social impact of these great works, in relation to sexual exploitation and even child labor." He went on to argue that, "[We] are alert and we have been negotiating agreements with the government and the private sector for the promotion and guarantee of fair labor."

But just this year, there were numerous rescue operations promoted by the Special Mobile Inspection Group of the Department of Labor. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of this month in the northeastern city of Salvador de Bahia, they discovered in the port that the cruise ship MSC Magnifica kept eleven workers in intolerable conditions.

According to the authorities, these employees worked eleven hours per day and suffered "victimization, humiliation, punishment and even molestation."

The cruise ship belonged to the Italian company MSC Crociere, one of the world's largest in that sector of business.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of this month a Brazilian court declined an appeal from Zara, of the Spanish clothing group Inditex, about its responsibility in the 2011 slavery situation in which fifteen workers suffered in fabric workshops of its clothing.

The multinational firm said that it was oblivious to those irregularities, committed by one of its fifty contractors in this country (Brazil). But the court sentenced Zara with "direct responsibility" and asked to include it on a list of companies with abusive practices, which didn't occur because the company made another appeal.

In March, seventeen Peruvians were liberated from a textile workshop in the southern city of São Paulo. The immigrants worked more than fourteen hours per day, without weekend time off, under cameras that kept watch of their activities and while their documents were held by the company owners.

They were between eighteen and thirty years old and received 1.03 dollars per piece of clothing fabricated, that afterwards would sell in clothing stores for around forty five dollars.

A representative from the ILO admitted that there is a new tendency of labor exploitation in which all the victims are foreigners.

Machado affirmed that "There is a great amount of Bolivians, Paraguayans, Peruvians and, recently, Haitians that arrive in search of a dream and the opportunity of a better life. A good part enters the country irregularly and fears deportation."

The fear of the law creates a "pact of silence" among the immigrants, as to not report their employers, that hinders investigation and gains strength exactly when reports occur.

The enslaved have to be young mestizos between 18 and 35, but in urban areas there is an increased number of women and children in hidden sewing workshops.

Despite this new path of neoslavery, this crime still remains predominant in rural areas. Campos dos Doytacazes for example, a city of 463 thousand inhabitants, obtained the lowly title of "nation's capital" of slave labor.

Carolina Abreu, who is a social assistant of the Pastoral Land Commission (part of the Comité Popular para la Erradicación del Trabajo Esclavo en el Norte Fluminense) told IPS that, "This year brought about the most successful rescue of sugar cutters in Brazil. During the harvest each year, there can be more than

five thousand workers in a single sugar plant, and those that come from afar get captured and fall into debt in order to survive, in something so deceptively casual.”

In 2009, the Department of Labor rescued 4,535 enslaved individuals and found, just in Campos de Goytacazes, 715 cases of slavery. Abreu said, “For this reason the region was first place. Outside of sugar, there are irregularities in pineapple farms and cattle ranches. The workers don’t have a contract and that which they do receive doesn’t reach minimum wage (320 dollars a month).”

The threat of mechanization in the reedbeds scares sugar cutters. This threat of losing their job pushes them to accept strenuous days. According to the Pastoral, a worker cuts between seven and ten tons daily.

Work accidents frequently occur. At the regional hospital where Abreu works in Travessão, a rural area of Campos de Goytacazes, an average of seventy machete accidents come in each year.

Moreover, there are cases of cutters that arrive because of cramps due to repetitive strain, and that aren’t registered as work accidents.

Abreu expressed that, “Many come to save some money to send to their families, because in their native regions there is no work. They live in absolute misery, they are malnourished and exhausted.”

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## **An eternal reform**

Since 1995, the legislative congress of Brazil has prepared a draft amendment of the Constitution to commandeer, without indemnification, the lands of those found responsible for labor overexploitation.

The project determines that the repossessed lands be allocated to the agricultural reform and the construction of community housing.

With the vehement resistance of the “Rural group” that defends the interests of the farming sector, the amendment was approved in 2012 in the House of Representatives and now continues its delay in the Senate.

To the United Nations, forced labor still exists because countries don’t make their sanctions severe enough. It’s estimated that there are eighteen million victims in the whole world and between twenty thousand and forty thousand in Brazil.

These workers fail to see twenty one million dollars each year in salary and are subject to precarious situations. At the same time, countries lose billions of dollars in taxes and societal contributions.

In 2003, the reform of the Brazilian Death Penalty typified how manual labor akin to slave labor performed in degrading conditions (with violation of fundamental rights that place the health and life of the worker in risk) and on strenuous days.

Other facets are forced labor (by fraud, exile, threats, and physical and psychological violence) and indebted serfdom.

This crime is punishable by two to eight years in prison.

That same year a National Commission was created, under the Department of Health and Human Services, with the objective to coordinate and implement the National Plan for the Eradication of Slave Labor, which was renewed in 2008.

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Source (Spanish): <http://www.ipsnoticias.net/2014/04/el-trabajo-esclavo-cambia-de-rostro-en-brasil/>

Translated by **Riley Pentico**.