

Sugarcane Fields in Brazil Have Become Killing Fields

Contributed by Tatiana Merlino
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As countries look to reduce toxic emissions from cars, many are promoting a fuel derived from sugar. However, it is important to consider the human element in this production.

Obligated to meet production goals of demanding sugarcane factories, two workers died in sugarcane fields of Guariba, in the Brazilian southeastern state of São Paulo, in July.

The workers were migrants from the northeastern state of Maranhão, and were temporarily working in this rural area of the state of São Paulo.

Valdecir Paiva de Lima, 37 years old, began to get sick on the afternoon of July 12. He fainted in the field and a couple of hours later died at São Francisco Hospital in the city of Ribeirão Preto.

According to co-workers, Lima had already complained of feeling sick, but the doctor of the Moreno Sugar Factory said that he did not have anything except "laziness."

Alcides V., 24 years old, died in a similar fashion cutting sugarcane for another factory in the region. While he was working, he fainted. By the time he got to the hospital, he was already dead.

Cases like these are not uncommon in the countryside of São Paulo. In April of last year, three people died in similar conditions while cutting cane.

According to Antonio Garcia Peres, a priest in the region, cane cutters are submitted to extremely high production goals, so high "they actually die from so much work. The lack of experience, psychological pressures to reach the goals, and precarious living situations all contribute to these deaths," commented Peres.

Excessive physical demands also contribute to the increase in work accidents and health problems like back strains and "birola," a convulsion accompanied by dizziness, headache and vomiting.

The work of sugarcane workers is temporary and last during the harvest season, from May until the beginning of December. Besides the work being heavy, it is even more difficult as the workers are contracted for a certain amount of sugarcane that they should cut.

Each year, the production goals rise, and those who cannot meet these goals are promptly fired at the end of the month. During the 1980s, the average production among the factories was five to six tons a day. In the 1990s, it went up to eight to nine tons. In the year 2000, it was 10 tons. Today, workers should cut anywhere from twelve to fifteen tons a day.

Every year, nearly 200,000 workers from the poorest regions of the country like Vale do Jequitinhonha, in Minas Gerais, and the Northeast backlands go to work in the sugarcane fields of São Paulo. Just one region of the state, Ribeirão Preto, is responsible for 30% of the total sugarcane production in Brazil.

Of Brazil's 309 sugar cane factories, 137 are in the state of São Paulo. Sugarcane producers move approximately US\$ 1.3 billion per year in production costs.

Source: Brasil de Fato - www.brasildefato.com.br