

Brazil's Wild West Has Largest Concentration of Slave Workers

Contributed by Irene Lôbo
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The Brazilian states with the highest incidence of slave labor are Pará, Mato Grosso, and Tocantins, areas where the agricultural frontier is expanding.

According to Patrícia Audi, coordinator of the International Labor Organization's (ILO) project in Brazil to combat slave labor, Mato Grosso, in particular, registers many instances of workers lured into jobs that involve clearing forests to plant pasture, cotton, and soybeans or clearing land that has already been deforested.

"It is precisely the Amazon development crescent, and that is why this region is more prone to the use of this criminal practice," Audi said.

Mato Grosso, the largest state in the Center-West region and one of Brazil's major agricultural frontiers, leads the country in the number of workers released from slave labor conditions by the Ministry of Labor and Employment's (MTE) mobile inspection groups. According to MTE data, 1,411 workers were freed last year in the state.

Audi observed that the workers held under slave conditions are generally simple people with little formal instruction.

The ILO considers Brazil an international model in the fight against slave labor, because the country acknowledges the existence of the problem and has adopted policies to combat the practice.

"It is a challenge, and Brazil has been winning the battle, but state governments really have to get more involved in the fight," she concluded.

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