
Brazil Company Linked to the Clintons Has Hundreds of Slave-Like Workers

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Seventeen Brazilian workers hired by Brenco, a biofuel company in which former American president Bill Clinton is one of the investors, have been rescued by a team from Brazil's Labor Ministry, which alleges that the men were being subjected to degrading, slave-like conditions.

According to the ministry, there were over 1500 laborers working in degrading living conditions and residing in hazardous installations in the company's locations in the Brazilian midwestern states of Goiás and Mato Grosso. The firm has promised to promptly remedy the situation.

Besides Clinton, Brenco, Brazil Renewable Energy Co, counts among its investors on AOL's founder Stephen Case, Sun Microsystems's founder Vinod Khosla and former World Bank's president, James Wolfensohn.

Brenco, which started one year ago in Brazil has big plans: among them to own 10 ethanol producing plants throughout the country with a capacity to produce 1 billion gallons of ethanol a year. The company is run by Henri Philippe Reichstul, the former president of Petrobras, Brazil's state-controlled oil multinational.

According to Brazil's public prosecutor, the Labor Ministry inspectors started their work on February 26 by visiting a "gato" (cat), the person responsible for recruiting workers for the biofuel company in Campo Alegre de Goiás.

Brazil's largest daily, Folha de S. Paulo, tells that it was in a house rented by the recruiter that the government investigators found the 17 rescued workers, who complained that they were not getting enough food. The inspectors also found out that the laborers were sleeping in wet mattresses due to the rain because the place had a leaky roof.

Public prosecutor Antônio Carlos Cavalcante, who took part in the raid, announced that he will file three public civil actions against the company, each one in the value of 5 million reais (US\$ 2.96 million) for collective moral damages. He wants the money to be used to help the three communities where the violations were found: Campo Alegre de Goiás, Mineiros and Alto Taquari.

In downtown Mineiros, in the state of Goiás, the labor ministry agents found a hotel where 116 men were being housed. The housing weren't much better here and the public prosecutor cited Brenco in this instance for overcrowding.

In the canvas-made lodging offered by the company, known as Urtigão 1, the government employees didn't find any egregious violation, but they noticed that employees were forbidden to go out or drink at night, apparently in an effort to increase workers productivity.

The inspector team also discovered a series of irregularities at Fazenda Laranjeiras, a sugarcane farm leased by Brenco. The company was ordered to stop all activities until the irregularities are remedied. Among the problems: lack of toilet paper and soap. Workers also didn't have decent sanitary installations or a covered place where they could eat a lunch time.

In Alto Taquari, in the state of Mato Grosso, in a place housing 1400 workers, there were found exposed electric wire and feces floating in the toilet. Most of the workers were from the northeastern states of Ceará, Maranhão and Piauí. 250 workers were able to get their final payment plus a bus ticket to their hometown. But others will wait hoping conditions will get better now.

Bill Clinton has invested in Brenco through The Yucaipa Cos., a U.S. fund in which the ex-president used to be a senior advisor. According to a financial disclosure presented last year by presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, the Brenco investment is worth between US\$ 15,000 and US\$ 50,000.

Bill Clinton spokesman Matt McKenna told AP that the former president's investment was small and that he had been assured that the Brazilian ethanol company was "committed to the highest ethical standard with regard to the treatment of its workforce and of the environment."