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Ethanol 'slaves' freed in raid

BRASILIA: Brazilian authorities say they have raided an Amazon plantation where more than 1000 labourers were found working 14-hour days in horrendous conditions, cutting sugar cane for ethanol production. They said the raid was Brazil's biggest so far against debt slavery, a practice that lures poor labourers to remote spots where they rack up debts to plantation owners who charge exorbitant prices for everything from food to transportation.

But the Amazon plantation's owner — the biggest ethanol producer in the northeastern state of Para — vigorously denied the charges yesterday and said the workers made good money by Brazilian standards.

The raid was in the remote town of Ulianopolis, the Agencia Brasil news agency said.

The company running the plantation said the government action lasted three days.

The Labour Ministry said 1108 labourers were found working from 3am until 5pm with only a short break for lunch. Many of them were sick because of spoiled food or unsafe water, slept in cramped quarters on hammocks and did not have proper sanitation facilities.

The company, Para Pastoril e Agricola SA, has been in operation since 1969 and each year produces 50 million litres of ethanol, often billed as an environmentally friendly alternative to petrol.

A Para Pastoril executive said allegations of abuse at the 10,000-hectare plantation were false.

"We have never had these type of problems and we must submit to constant government inspections," the executive, Fernao Zancaner, said.

Brazil is a huge user of ethanol because eight out of every 10 new cars sold are "flex-fuel" models that run on petrol, ethanol or a combination of the two.

Brazil is also a major ethanol exporter and is receiving billions of dollars in investment for the alternative fuel.

But the country is under heavy pressure to improve working conditions for the cane cutters.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva pledged in May to bring industry leaders and workers together "to discuss the humanisation of the sugar cane sector in this country".

The promise came after he was criticised for calling Brazil's ethanol producers "national and world heroes". Critics say producers pocket huge profits while the workers suffer.

Brazil's Labor Ministry has been monitoring farmers and ranchers with a group it calls the Mobile Verification Task Force, which conducted the raid on the Para state plantation. The group, which was founded in 1995, says it has freed more than 21,000 workers from debt slave conditions at more than 1600 farms across Brazil.

The Catholic Church's Land Pastoral group, which helps rural workers in Brazil, estimates 25,000 workers are living in slave-like conditions, most of them in the Amazon.

Typically, recruiters go to poor rural areas and guarantee peasants good wages and benefits, but renege on those pledges once the labourers arrive at the jungle workplace and are guarded by gunmen.

Eduardo Varandas, a federal prosecutor who has brought slavery charges against several ranchers, said: "Slavery remains a severe social and economic problem in this country, the result of people without food or land being duped by false promises."

AP