

## International news

# Sun sets on Brazil's sugar-cane cutters

**Terry Macalister** São Paulo

Half a million jobs and five centuries of tradition are to be phased out in Brazil's booming sugar-cane industry to satisfy western demands for more socially acceptable work practices in the biofuel sector.

Sugar-cane cutters, who have been working Brazil's land since the 1520s, when Portuguese colonialists first experimented with growing the crop, are to make way for mechanisation.

The Brazilian Sugar Cane Industry Association (Unica) said that 80% of the 500,000 jobs would go within three years and admitted that moving to a tractor-based system would cause upheaval for its migrant workforce. Unica agreed that there were few alternative jobs. "This will not solve the problem of migration," said Marcos Jank, Unica's president, adding that the group had signed a protocol with the government to improve conditions

But the condition of workers was rarely noticed when sugar was the main product. Things have changed now that Brazil is the world's second-largest exporter of sugar-based ethanol to use as a biofuel in petrol.

Behind the move to phase out sugar-cane cutters are tales of exploitation that have damaged the image of Brazilian biofuels in big importing countries such as Sweden and potentially in Britain. Critics have accused Brazil's sugar-cane industry of presiding over child labour, huge accident rates and paying workers as little as \$1.35 an hour. Employers insist that pay is three times that level.

Manual labour is also blamed for poor environmental practices such as crop wastage and the burning of stubble and leaves before cutting. Mechanisation will allow more of the crop to be harvested and by-products to be used as biomass to power electricity plants, argues Unica.



**Lost tradition . . . job losses loom for cane cutters** Reuters/Jamil Bittar

Brazilian ethanol output grew by nearly a quarter in 2007 to a record 22bn litres, with about 4bn being exported. The government believed it was going to be able to build a huge new export industry around biofuels. But that dream is under threat as the emerging crop-based fuel sector becomes mired in arguments over "food for fuel" and the idea that rising food prices can be attributed to farmers using land to grow fuel crops. There are also claims that biofuels are causing deforestation in sensitive areas such

as Brazil's Amazon basin, which is seen by scientists as the lungs of the world because the trees there absorb so much carbon.

Unica said that subsidies in the US and Europe for farmers and biofuels might be a cause of the rising price of food, which has caused riots in scores of countries this year. But Jank insisted that Brazil was not contributing to that development because only 1% of arable land was used for ethanol production, and the Amazon region was too wet to grow sugar.