

Silva vows help for Brazil cane cutters

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BRASILIA, Brazil --

Brazil will push to improve working conditions for sugarcane cutters who harvest most of the cane that is turned into ethanol for the nation's booming biofuel industry, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said Tuesday.

Brazil has been criticized over conditions for cane cutters, who use machetes to chop down sugarcane for wealthy landowners with large plantations where the cane is distilled into ethanol.

Brazil "must take the next step, to discuss the humanization of the sugar cane sector in this country," Silva said at a news conference.

Silva said the government will approach both industry leaders and workers.

Silva was widely criticized recently at home for calling Brazil's ethanol producers "national and world heroes." Critics said producers were pocketing huge profits while their workers suffered under miserable conditions.

On the same day in March that he made that statement, Brazil's Labor Ministry accused a cane field owner of violating labor codes by denying workers proper safety equipment, safe water and bathrooms as they worked under the hot sun, according to the Folha de S. Paulo, Brazil's largest newspaper. At least 17 workers have died since 2004 on cane plantations, the newspaper said.

Silva told reporters that his administration wants to make sure that foreign investors are not the only ones that profit from ethanol in Brazil, the world's largest exporter of the increasingly popular alternative fuel and the No. 2 producer behind the United States.

While Brazil's ethanol boom started as a homegrown phenomenon on sugar plantations owned primarily by wealthy Brazilians, foreign investors have invested billions of dollars into the industry over the last several years.

The ethanol sector took off in 2004, when automakers started producing "flex-fuel" cars that run on pure ethanol, gas or any combination of the two.

Most drivers choose ethanol, which is about half the price of gas in Brazil, and eight out of every 10 new cars sold in the country are flex-fuel models.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Cuban leader Fidel Castro have criticized the switch to ethanol, saying that farmland across South America may be turned to energy production - robbing poor farmers of their land and causing hunger.

Silva signed an agreement two months ago with the United States to promote ethanol production in the Americas.