

# Brazil stages raid against debt slavery

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BRASILIA, Brazil --

Brazilian authorities said they raided an Amazon plantation where more than 1,000 laborers were found working 14-hour days in horrendous conditions cutting sugar cane for ethanol production.

Authorities said the raid was Brazil's biggest to date against debt slavery, a practice that lures poor laborers 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 Tuesday and said the workers make good money by Brazilian standards.

The raid was in the remote town of Ulianopolis, the government-run Agencia Brasil news agency said late Monday. The company running the plantation said the government action started Friday and lasted three days.

Police found 1,108 poor workers working from 3 a.m. until 5 p.m. with only a short break for lunch, Humberto Celio, coordinator of the Labor Ministry's special unit that frees debt slaves, told Agencia Brasil.

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, Celio said.

The company, Para Pastoral e Agricola SA, has been in operation since 1969 and each year produces 13.2 million gallons of ethanol, often billed as an environmentally friendly alternative to gasoline.

A Para Pastoral executive said allegations of abuse at the 24,700-acre plantation are "totally false."

"We have never had these type of problems and we must submit to constant government inspections," the executive, Fernao Zancaner, said in a telephone interview. The Labor Ministry said no one would be available to comment until Tuesday afternoon.

The company has 1,800 employees, Zancaner said. Sugar cane cutters receive between 700 to 800 reais (\$368 to \$421) a month, far above the nation's minimum wage of 380 reais (\$200). In the Amazon region, many workers make less than the minimum.

Brazil is a huge user of ethanol because eight out of every 10 new cars sold are "flex-fuel" models that run on gasoline, ethanol or any combination of the two. Ethanol currently sells for about half the price of gasoline in Brazil.

Brazil is also a major ethanol exporter and is receiving billions of dollars of investment amid rising international demand for the alternative fuel.

But the country is under heavy pressure to improve working conditions for the sugar cane cutters who harvest much of the cane.

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

The Amazon raid was larger than a 2005 raid when 1,000 workers were found laboring under similar conditions at a sugar cane-ethanol plantation in the central state of Mato Grosso.