Brazil Employers Accused Of Slave-Like Conditions

Stan Lehman, Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Nearly 300 employers in South America's biggest country submit workers to slave-like conditions, Brazil's Labor Ministry said Tuesday.

The ministry said in a statement that its "dirty list" increased by 52 and now has a total of 294 employers, from big to small.

Reporter Brasil, a non-governmental organization that monitors slave labor in Brazil and efforts to combat it, praised the government's drive to eradicate slave-like working conditions, but said much remains to be done to eradicate the practice.

Until those employers on the "dirty list" stop the practice, they won't be able to obtain credit from government and private banks.

Their products also will be boycotted by companies that have signed the National Slave Labor Eradication Pact, which according to local media represents 25 percent of Brazil's Gross Domestic Product.

The dirty list was created in 2005 and is updated twice a year. To be taken off the list, an employer must pay a series of fines and unpaid labor-related taxes.

"The biggest penalty they (the blacklisted employers) face is not being able to get credits from the banks," said Alexandre da Cunha Lyra, head of the Labor Ministry's inspection service. "They are not worried with how much of a fine they will have to pay, but with possibility of not receiving any financing."

He said the growth of the "dirty list" was not due to an increase in the number of workers submitted to slave-like conditions but to increased surveillance by ministry inspectors.

Reporter Brasil's coordinator, Leonardo Sakamoto said Brazil has come a long way since it started cracking down on slave labor in 1995, "but we still have a long way to go, especially in terms of eradicating poverty, which is the main reason why slave-like conditions survive."

He said slave-like working conditions are sustained by the "tripod of impunity, greed and poverty."

"Brazil is successfully tackling the first two legs," Sakamoto said, but while poverty levels have dropped "we still haven't succeeded in improving things like education health, housing and transportation which are important to reduce it even more."

Brazil's legal category of slave-like labor includes cases in which a person is subjected to exhausting hours, is forbidden to leave because of a debt with the employer and earns less than the minimum wage of 622 reals ($336).

Many cases of slave-like labor are found in rural areas where sugarcane and other crops are grown. Inspectors have also found workers submitted to slave-like conditions in the textile and clothing sector.

According to Reporter Brasil, sugar mills, ranchers, supermarkets, shopping malls and construction firms are also among those on the "dirty list."

In December, prosecutors and Spanish retail chain Zara reached a $1.8 million settlement after investigators found slave-like conditions at factories supplying the brand.

Zara was not on the list released on Tuesday.

The Labor Ministry says that 2,271 people working "under degrading conditions" were freed by authorities last year and that 5.4 million reals ($2.9 million) were paid in labor compensation.

Between 1995 to 2011, nearly 41,500 workers were freed from slave-like conditions, the ministry said.

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