

THE AMERICAS

CUBA

Cuba accused of slavelike labor deal

■ **Cuban shipyard workers say they were forced to work as modern slaves at a Curacao ship repair company.**

BY FRANCES ROBLES
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The Cuban government conspired with a Curacao ship repair company to provide practically slave labor fixing up vessels, including Miami-based cruise ships, and kept workers under harsh conditions, a lawsuit filed in U.S. District court in Miami alleges.

The civil suit filed before Judge James Lawrence King alleges that up to 100 Cuban shipyard workers are forced to work against their will at Curacao Drydock Co., a ship repair company with an agent in Delray Beach, Klattenberg Marine Associates.

The suit, filed by three

workers who escaped and now live in Florida, alleges they were ordered to work 16-hour shifts for \$16 a month, a low wage common in their native Cuba.

"We started work at 3 in the afternoon and kept working until 7 a.m. the following day," plaintiff Alberto Justo Rodríguez told The Miami Herald. "We worked in the worst, most uncomfortable parts of the ship. Where nobody wanted to go — that's where they sent the Cubans."

112 HOURS A WEEK

According to the suit, the men often worked 112 hours a week.

Their wage amounted to 3/4 cents an hour.

The suit was filed two months ago and was first reported Friday by The Associated Press.

Rodríguez, a former ship-

yard worker in Cuba, was summoned to the Ministry of Transportation in 2001 for a mandatory transfer to Curacao. Upon arrival on the Caribbean island, he says, his passport was seized.

He and up to 100 other Cubans worked on a joint venture with the Cuban government and Curacao Drydock, a company that does shipyard repair, including work for U.S.-based cruise lines, oil companies and shipping firms.

The joint venture between the Cuban government and Curacao Drydock has Cuba providing the workers for the company, providing a source of cash for the Cuban government, the suit alleges.

Curacao Drydock, the suit alleges, knew the Cuban workers were being held against their will.

A written statement provided by Curacao Drydock

attorney Matt Triggs to The Miami Herald says many of the suit's allegations are directed at the Cuban government.

"There are allegations, however, regarding the health and safety of our employees that are of great concern to Curacao Drydock Co.," the statement said, stressing that the company has safety measures in place. "Nevertheless, the company is undertaking a full investigation of the allegations."

The suit claims the men were forced to labor in sweltering weather and dangerous conditions, like hanging from scaffolds. When Rodríguez broke his foot and ankle in 2002 while scraping rust from the hull of a ship, he was sent home to heal — and then ordered back after his recovery.

The suit claims plaintiff

Luis Alberto Casanova once suffered an electric shock but was forced to finish his shift despite bleeding from his tongue.

The workers' supervisors were other Cubans, including a nephew of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, the suit alleges.

"They always told us if we didn't work, they'd throw us out of the country, fire us and send us to jail," Rodríguez said. "Really, we were slaves. We didn't have a voice or a vote."

FORCED VIEWING

On time off, Rodríguez said, they were forced to watch videos of political speeches, marches and the Cuban government *Mesa Redonda* — Round Table — TV news shows. He escaped in 2004 and now works odd jobs in Hialeah.

The suit was filed by Miami

Beach lawyer John Andres Thornton under the Aliens Tort Act, which allows foreigners to file civil suits in U.S. federal courts when an international law has been violated.

Curacao Drydock has asked the judge to dismiss the complaint for lack of jurisdiction.

The suit seeks unspecified damages. No trial date has been set.

Co-plaintiffs Fernando Alonso Hernández worked in Curacao from 1995 until he fled in January 2005. He and the third plaintiff, Luis Alberto Casanova, who worked in Curacao from 2002 until 2005, now work in shipyards in Tampa.

One of the plaintiffs, Thornton said, now makes in an hour what he used to get in a month.

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LATIN AMERICA BRIEFS

• VENEZUELA

Chávez reports Castro is walking, touring cities

From Miami Herald Wire Services

CARACAS — Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez said Friday that Cuban leader Fidel Castro is up and about again, taking trips at night into the countryside as he recovers from surgery.

"He is walking around already and goes out at night to tour the countryside, towns and cities. I'm soon going to go see you, Fidel," Chávez said during a speech to cacao producers in Venezuela Friday.

After nearly a half-century in office, Castro temporarily ceded power to his brother Raúl in July after undergoing intestinal surgery.

• MEXICO

U.S. JOURNALIST DEAD IN OAXACA SHOOTINGS

OAXACA — Two shootouts erupted Friday during separate clashes in the protest-besieged Mexican city of Oaxaca, killing a U.S. journalist and injuring several others, police said.

The journalist was shot in the abdomen and died later at a hospital, said a police official who was not authorized to give his name.

A co-worker identified the victim as a New York native who worked for Indy media.org.

• BRAZIL

BEGGARS ATTACK OFFICER AT HOSPITAL

RIO DE JANEIRO — A group of beggars broke into a city-owned hospital to shower under a broken toilet pipe in the yard of Souza Aguiar Hospital and attacked the security chief before guards evicted them, a security guard said Friday.

• ARGENTINA

IRAN REJECTS 1994 BOMBING CLAIMS

TEHRAN — The Iranian government rejected as unfounded accusations by Argentine prosecutors that high-ranking Iranian officials were linked to a 1994 Buenos Aires bombing, state-run radio reported on Friday. "It is necessary for Argentine officials to make comments based on the evidence," Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini was quoted as saying.

• PUERTO RICO

CONVICTED KILLER GETS LIFE IN PRISON

SAN JUAN — A jury sentenced convicted murderer Carlos Ayala López to life in prison instead of giving him a death sentence sought by prosecutors in a case that reignited debate on capital punishment, which was outlawed nearly 80 years ago in this U.S. territory.

A HAPPY BIRTHDAY, A COMFORTABLE LEAD



ERALDO PERES/AP

Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva celebrates his 61st birthday on Friday in front of the official residence of the Alvorada Palace in Brasília. Lula da Silva, who has a comfortable lead in opinion polls, is likely to be reelected in Sunday's presidential runoff.

U.N. SECURITY COUNCIL

Countries resolute in U.N. standoff

■ **A U.N. deadlock between Guatemala and Venezuela is likely to persist as pride and diplomatic complexities thwart efforts for a compromise choice.**

BY PABLO BACHELET
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WASHINGTON — Venezuela and Guatemala stubbornly renewed their campaigns Friday for a U.N. Security Council seat, blaming each other for a standoff that has produced the most competitive race in 27 years and setting the stage for even more rounds of voting next week.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro met with Arab League nations Friday in an effort to shore up support for his country in the upcoming votes, and blamed Guatemala for reneging on earlier agreements to seek a consensus candidate.

"Guatemala is changing its mind because they are following the signal sent by the U.S. administration," said Maduro, whose country has cast the election as a confrontation between U.S. "imperialist" designs and the world's poor.

The United States and Guatemala have denied the Venezuelan complaints, though Washington has said that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's leftist government would play an obstructionist role on the U.N.'s most powerful institution.

Guatemalan Foreign Minister Gert Rosenthal said it was still too early to seek a consensus candidate since his country has won all but one of the 41 rounds of voting carried out so far. But it has fallen short of the required two-thirds major-

ity. "We still believe we have the possibility of getting enough votes to prevail," Rosenthal was quoted as saying by the Associated Press. "Our position is different from theirs. They don't have any chances."

Guatemala's refusal to drop out of the race, despite an earlier Venezuelan offer to also withdraw in favor of a third country, appears to be the result in part of national pride.

"We were founding members [of the United Nations] and we've never had access to a place in the Security Council," said Julio Lowenthal Fonseca, vice president of the congressional foreign relations committee. "We think it's our turn," he noted.

Privately, diplomats said the process had become fraught with intricacies that will make it virtually impossible for either Guatemala or Venezuela to win the Security Council seat, reserved for a Latin American or Caribbean nation.

Guatemala and Venezuela would first have to agree to withdraw and then anoint a third nation to replace them, presumably with the agreement of the Latin American-Caribbean bloc and perhaps Washington, said one U.N. insider.

Considered as possible consensus alternatives: Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Panama.

Chávez has suggested Bolivia, led by leftist President Evo Morales, a political ally.

Miami Herald special correspondent Jill Replogle contributed to this report from Guatemala City.

COLOMBIA

Seized computer files reveal paramilitary secrets

■ **The confiscation of a series of computer files has opened up the paramilitaries' Pandora's Box in Colombia.**

BY STEVEN DUDLEY
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BOGOTA — Picture one of Tony Soprano's top lieutenants putting everything the crime family did on a computer, then police raiding his home and confiscating the computer.

Such is the real-life case of Rodrigo Tovar, alias Jorge 40, a top leader of Colombia's right-wing paramilitary groups whose administrator and enforcer was captured along with two computers, some memory sticks and several CDs chock full of information.

After months of cutting through the encoded files, authorities have found details of hundreds of assassinations, extortion and political maneu-

vers that only a screenwriter could imagine.

"The dangerous nature of the facts has a lot people afraid," said Gustavo Petro, a former leftist guerrilla and now opposition senator who held a riveting congressional session on the computer files last week.

"They're not just maneuvering to gain control of small lands like they used to," he added, referring to the paramilitaries. "Now they're moving into the large formal economy."

DELICATE TIME

The case of the Tovar computer comes at a delicate time for President Alvaro Uribe, who has been trying to finalize a two-year old peace process with the paramilitaries marred by allegations of fraud and injustice. Washington is still debating another round of aid for Colombia, including assistance for the paramilitary

peace process.

The Tovar computer is doing damage on both fronts. It has ensnared several politicians, some of whom have worked with Uribe on legislation covering the paramilitary peace process. This week, the Supreme Court interrogated three congressmen on their alleged links to paramilitaries.

The computer also illustrates how the paramilitaries were dedicated to criminal activities, even though they have tried to justify their illegal dealings by saying they needed the money to fight Marxist guerrilla forces.

"This shows that this isn't a counter-guerrilla strategy," Petro said. "This is a mafia."

Paramilitaries emerged in the early 1980s at the behest of large landowners, businessmen, drug traffickers and the Colombian military to fight off guerrilla attacks in the countryside. They grew exponentially in the late 1990s, assassi-

nating thousands of suspected guerrillas and sympathizers, political opponents and even common criminals.

Uribe has been negotiating with the paramilitaries since 2004 to end this war within a war. Close to 32,000 paramilitary soldiers and dozens of commanders like Tovar have handed in their weapons under a controversial law that would lower their sentences in return for their cooperation.

The computer files may complicate Tovar's case and those of dozens of other paramilitary commanders now detained throughout the country. The investigation into the computer has come out in pieces in the local media, with each part opening a small window into how Tovar's paramilitaries operate in the political, social and economic spheres.

Part of the investigation's documents, obtained by The Miami Herald, chronicled doz-

ens of assassinations of suspected guerrilla collaborators, lawyers, unionists and human rights workers along Colombia's northern coast.

ASSASSINATIONS

According to local media accounts, the entire Attorney General's investigation lays out a macabre network that assassinated as many as 558 people, all of them while the peace process with the government was under way.

"This man (Tovar) betrayed the government and the country," said Mauricio Romero, a political science professor at the National University in Bogotá.

The files also say that Tovar coerced many small farmers who weren't paramilitaries to dress in camouflage and pretend they were. If true, the subsequent "demobilization" by Tovar and his more than 1,000 fighters in March amounted to a charade. Many

of the demobilized paramilitaries now receive monthly stipends from the government.

The computer files also say that the paramilitaries gave campaign money to local and national politicians in return for undisclosed favors. Authorities have questioned some of these politicians already, and investigators hinted they may charge some with criminal conspiracy.

In addition, the files illuminate the degree to which the paramilitaries had taken over businesses, including a major bus company, and even some government services like garbage pick ups.

Given the revelations from the computer, it's not clear what will happen to Tovar. He's in custody as part of the demobilization deal. He's also wanted in the United States for drug trafficking. But, as the computer files show, he may still wield huge political and economic powers.