

Brazil church agency joins NGO in new campaign to end slave labor

SAO PAULO - Ten years ago, workers escaping brutal working conditions in Brazil's Amazon region had only one place they could turn to for help: the Pastoral Land Commission of the Brazilian bishops' conference.

"The police and even Labor Ministry officials would send these people over to us," said French Dominican Father Xavier Plassat, coordinator of the commission's National Campaign Against Slave Labor. Local and federal governments did not have the structure or policies to deal with slave laborers, he said.

While that has changed, the commission's campaign remains a leading voice in the effort to fight modern-day slavery in Brazil.

Father Plassat stopped briefly in Sao Paulo in late August for meetings with a partner group, Reporter Brasil, and spoke with Catholic News Service.

The National Campaign Against Slave Labor is partnering with Reporter Brasil, a nongovernmental organization, in a new movement against the practice. Part of the movement involves asking candidates - including those running for president, governors and state and federal legislatures - to commit in writing to make the eradication of slave labor one of their goals. Each candidate is being asked to agree to resign if an accusation of slave labor is proven on rural property he or she owns.

Father Plassat told CNS the church has dealt with the issue of slave labor in the Amazon region since the 1970s when Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga Pla of Sao Felix publicly denounced it. However, Father Plassat acknowledged, "the numbers are still disappointing."

"The more monitoring there is, more cases are discovered," he said.

About 4,000-5,000 slave laborers are freed annually, he added.

Since the project to document cases of slave labor began, investigators have found

that slavery has entered states where it previously was unreported.

“Slave labor is still more commonly found in agriculture, but we are now seeing these situations in plantations of sugar cane and mate (leaves used for teas) in the center and south of Brazil, far from the traditional agricultural frontiers of the Amazon region,” Father Plassat said.

The Pastoral Land Commission has no legal authority to act against individuals promoting slave labor. It can only provide shelter, food and safety to victims and inform officials of the situation.

“We are there on the day-to-day situations, leaving local, state and federal governments to come up with public policies and penalties for the deeds,” the priest said.

But Father Plassat, who in June was honored by the U.S. State Department as one of seven heroes in the fight against human trafficking, said it is society’s responsibility to end slavery.

“Retailers should not buy from those employing slave labor. The financial system should not lend to them. The state should not subsidize their production, and politicians should not be accomplices to the activity,” he said.

Since the 1990s, the commission has been joined by new partners in the fight against slave labor. In 2003, the commission uncovered 75 percent of slave labor cases, but the percentage fell to 30 percent in 2010 as more organizations have become involved, he said.

“In some remote places, we are still the ones these workers come to when they want help,” Father Plassat added.