

Press Release: Remediation for Workers Paramount After US Customs and Border Protection Blocks all Central Romana Sugar Imports from the Dominican Republic

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Nov, 23, 2022: Today, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) issued a Withhold Release Order (WRO) against raw sugar and sugar-based products produced by Central Romana Corporation Limited (Central Romana) in the Dominican Republic. This WRO comes after CBP found five indicators of forced labor: abuse of vulnerability, isolation, withholding of wages, abusive working and living conditions, and excessive overtime. We applaud this WRO, having recently urged the Biden Administration to take this step in an [open letter](#) from Corporate Accountability Lab, the AFL-CIO, Global Labor Justice-International Labor Rights Forum, Human Trafficking Legal Center, Liberty Shared, Solidarity Center, Verité, Worker Rights Consortium and nine other organizations.

We welcome this long-overdue move by CBP to address the rampant forced labor in the Dominican sugar sector. The challenge now is to ensure that Central Romana remediates the harm to workers to the fullest extent. Remediation must include improving working conditions, including by providing workers with a living wage and written contracts, following all local labor laws, and providing workers with appropriate protective equipment; providing workers with adequate housing and sanitation, including access to the electrical grid and clean, running water; ceasing all retaliation and threats against workers and human rights defenders; stopping the use of hired “paramilitary-style” night guards and other armed guards that intimidate workers; and assisting workers to access must be provided with documentation and regularization of their legal status.

“This WRO is the first step toward cane cutters finally having their legal rights protected. We urge Central Romana to prioritize the wellbeing of the workers as they develop a swift and comprehensive remediation plan,” said Charity Ryerson, Executive Director of Corporate Accountability Lab. “We now have an extraordinary opportunity for CBP, Central Romana, and civil society to work together to ensure that workers are free, they are treated fairly, and that forced labor never happens on these farms again. Remediation means improving conditions, not deporting workers. Deportation constitutes a continuation of the harm.”

For decades, Central Romana has abused and exploited its workers in the Dominican Republic, with egregious labor conditions in its sugar cane fields. Workers, many of whom are migrants from Haiti, earn poverty wages while working for over ten hours a day, six days a week, under

the hot sun. Cane cutters live in ramshackle homes, often without electricity or plumbing, in “company towns,” known as *bateyes*, owned by Central Romana.

Central Romana has long exploited the fact that many of its workers are Haitian or of Haitian descent and often lack legal immigration status. An August 2022 study by Howard University Professor Nikongo BaNikongo found that Central Romana uses the threat “to report people who lack proper documentation to the authorities [as] a standard tool of enforcement...” Workers have also reported that they were deceived about working conditions during recruitment, and were lured to the Dominican Republic by recruiters who promised higher wages, paid time off, written contracts and overtime pay – none of which materialized.

Central Romana has also hired “paramilitary-style” night guards that are so abusive that even members of the company’s daytime security force have expressed trepidation. One ex-Central Romana guard commented to journalists that their “weapons, the head-to-toe blue-black uniforms, and the full facial masks...create an atmosphere of intimidation so that the cane cutters and their families ‘always live in fear.’”