Nachbar Haiti

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Eleven years later, he is still eking out a living on the same batey, or labour encampment, where he arrived, with no money, nine fingers, and a foot-long vertical gash on his chest that has been sewn up like a mailbag.

“Can you help me get a cédula?” he asks, using the Spanish word for an identity card. Mr de la Cruz is miraculously alive after electrocuting himself trying to connect a wire to an overhead cable to access power.

A journey into the sugar plantations and the bateyes a few kilometres behind the Dominican Republic’s coastal strip of manicured golf courses and tourism resorts is like time-travelling back to the 19th century.
Tens of thousands of Haitian labourers have migrated to the Dominican Republic each year for decades to work in grim conditions in the sugar cane fields and in the November-May harvest.

So important is Haiti as a historical source of labour that between 1930 and 1961, General Rafael Trujillo maintained a quota with Haiti that allowed a fixed number of Haitians to enter for the harvest.

But today it is an uneasy relationship.

Some Dominicans still find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that their country was governed from Port-Au-Prince for two decades after independence from Spain.

Social tensions have been aggravated in recent years because most migrant labourers have stayed in the Dominican Republic rather than return. Chaos in Haiti combined with tight US immigration enforcement has increased the flow of migrants across the 350km border.

“Haiti is becoming a much more important feature of the national debate,” says Hugo Guiliani, a veteran Dominican diplomat.

First generation but illegal Haitian immigrants are now estimated to account for 10 to 15 per cent of the Dominican Republic’s 9m population.

“A census of foreigners would be a census of Haitians,” says sociologist Frank Hernández, president of Idea, a local think tank.

“To be Haitian is to be a scapegoat for the worst. A kind of Haiti-phobia is developing.”

In recent months there has been a spate of race-motivated murders of Haitians, deteriorating relations further. Protesters stoned President Leonel Fernández’s car when he visited Haiti in December.

Haitian cane cutters often claim they have been ferried across in convoys of lorries with the complicity of corrupt border guards and the army.

Periodically, officials crack down and repatriate Haitians, but usually once the harvest has ended. Cheap labour is essential for the industry.

The country produces 500,000 tonnes of sugar per year, by far the largest producer of which is the Vicini Group. One tonne of sugar cane yields about 100kg of refined sugar.

It is big business. The Dominican Republic has the largest US quota for sugar with an allocation of 185,335 tonnes, or 16.4 per cent of the total.

Dominican sugar producers battled against DR-Cafta for more than a year and attempted to lobby legislators into passing a 25 per cent tax on imports of cheaper US corn syrup, irking US negotiators.

Conditions on the plantations are also attracting interest in the US.

A US Congressional Research Report released in January said: “Some 650,000 Haitians, unable to gain citizenship for themselves or for their children born in the Dominican Republic, live and work under slave-like conditions in the sugar cane, construction or domestic service industries.”

Child labour is common. Adults and children alike are paid $2 to $3 a day, but they are deducted “social security” contributions. Until last year they were paid with chits redeemable at the company store.

Haitian workers complain that the scales used to weigh the several tonnes of cane they cut every day are manipulated.

“I really don’t think the scales work properly,” says Jeremi Dimach, 28, a cane cutter, as a menacing foreman, on horseback and with a pistol in his waistband, approaches from the corner of the plantation. The Vicini Group declined to comment on the labour conditions on its plantations.

Christopher Hartley, an Anglo-Spanish priest whose 700 sq km parish near San Pedro de Macoris overlaps numerous sugar estates, dedicates his time to seeking an improvement to Haitian labour conditions. “This is modern day slavery,” says Mr Hartley, who once worked in the Bronx and now has police protection following death threats. “Over 100 years the wealthiest families have made their money from this labour.”

Some local media commentators have accused human rights activists and priests such as Mr Hartley of attempting to destroy the sugar industry. But as a US diplomat crudely put it: “The sugar industry runs on blood money.”