

Uncommon Productions

Presents

THE PRICE OF SUGAR

A film by Bill Haney

Narrated by Paul Newman



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SHORT SYNOPSIS

Just a few miles inland from the tourist-filled beaches of the Dominican Republic, hidden from view, thousands of dispossessed Haitians have toiled under armed-guard harvesting sugarcane, much of which ends up in U.S. kitchens. They work grueling hours and frequently lack decent housing, clean water, electricity, education or healthcare. "The Price of Sugar" follows Father Christopher Hartley, a charismatic Spanish priest, as he organizes some of this hemisphere's poorest people, challenging powerful interests profiting from their work. The Vicini family which owns some of the sugar plantations on which the film was shot has filed a lawsuit against the filmmakers in an attempt to block the film's release. This film raises key questions about where the products we consume originate and at what human cost they are produced.

LONG SYNOPSIS

It is the middle of the night, and Father Christopher Hartley and his elder colleague, Father Pedro Ruquoy, have driven down a lonely road to reach the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. There, a busload of Haitians – presumably illegal immigrants, but ready to pay the expected, and informal, “fees” to enter the Dominican Republic – are stuck waiting at the border. Most of the travelers have paid a lifetime’s accumulated money to cross the border, but something’s held them up. They’re waiting for the trucks and buses to take them to the cane fields. There’s really nothing to be done for them, but Father Hartley does what he can, ultimately offering the only thing, and perhaps most precious thing, he has to offer: His prayers.

In “The Price of Sugar,” filmmaker Bill Haney charts the heartbreaking plight of Haitian immigrants trapped in a modern form of indentured servitude – slavery is probably a better term – as they toil in the sugarcane fields of the Dominican Republic. Father Christopher Hartley, the son of a wealthy Englishman and a Spanish aristocrat, acts first as a guide, and then as a leading figure, in a graphic and dramatic cinematic tour of the harsh fields, the workers’ company-built *bateyes* (shantytowns), and, as much as possible, the luxurious homes and offices of the extraordinarily wealthy and powerful family who own the sugar plantations within Father Hartley’s sprawling parish.

You’d think Father Hartley would be a local hero. And the Creole-speaking Haitians are grateful for his help in getting them medical care, alleviating the worst of their wants, and providing spiritual succor. But many of the local Spanish-speaking Dominicans hate Father Hartley passionately, denouncing him as a “devil” in demonstrations ostensibly whipped up by plantation owners.

So “The Price of Sugar” delves not just into the plain and painful circumstances of workers who, incredibly in the 21st century, still must buy all their necessities at a company store. But director Haney also sketches out a less visible, but dominating, landscape of social,

political, and economic forces all brought to bear on the sorrowfully expendable hands and backs of virtually-enslaved Haitian laborers.

Haney's three-pronged documentary was filmed over three years, mostly in the Dominican Republic but also in Spain. "The Price of Sugar" is narrated by Paul Newman. And, perhaps most of all, it boasts a "cast" of people whose lives and struggles are now thankfully inerasable, a cast headed by Father Hartley, but populated by an array of powerfully opposed forces, their pawns and, most crucially, those Haitians who may be cruelly exploited in the shadows thrown up by global capitalism, but whose humanity still shines forth brilliantly.

PRINCIPAL CREDIT LIST

Director:	Bill Haney
Writers:	Bill Haney and Peter Rhodes
Producers:	Eric Grunebaum and Bill Haney
Editor:	Peter Rhodes
Composer:	Claudio Ragazzi
Cinematographers:	Eric Cochran and Jerry Risius
Sound Recordists:	John Osborne and Thomas Knight
Executive Producer:	Tim Disney
Co-Executive Producers:	Abby Disney, Kees Kasander and Marie Langlois
Assistant Editor:	Nikki Bramley
Associate Producers:	Debra Longo, Diana Trudell, Noemí Araujo Martínez
Business Manager:	Lori Joyal
Narrator:	Paul Newman
Featuring:	Father Christopher Hartley

Also Appearing

Jhonny Belizaire	Yela Machasa
Dr. Heather Crouse	Noemí Méndez
Christina Fontecchio	Dr. Jennifer Noon
Vicente Jules García	Bishop Francisco Ozoria Acosta
Christopher Hartley	Gustavo Olivo Peña
Pilar Sartorius Hartley	Flor Angel Polanco
Virginia Hartley	Father Pedro Ruquoy
William Hartley	Dr. Kim Wilson
Ana Mitila Lora	

And the men, women and children of the bateyes

DIRECTOR Q & A WITH BILL HANEY

International Documentary Association [IDA]: How did you get started in documentary filmmaking?

Bill Haney: Two quite different experiences propelled me into filmmaking.

The first was prompted by my mother.

I was 35 years old, running a high tech company and harboring not the slightest inkling of ever working in film. My mom called and said she needed a favor.

As it turned out, a childhood neighbor had become a subject in an uncompleted Errol Morris film. At 12 years old, George Mendonca dropped out of school to work as a gardener near the school where my dad taught, and I lived. After 50 years of work, he had become the world's foremost topiary gardener. Errol chose him as one of the subjects in his film "Fast, Cheap & Out of Control," but the film ran into some snags and remained unfinished for some time. George was by now getting quite old, and his wife told my mother that his greatest wish was to see Errol's film finished before he died. I called Errol and offered to lend a hand. It was my first connection with documentary filmmaking.

A majestic grey whale reeled me to actually making my first film.

Three years after calling Errol, I was camping in a desolate section of Baja California that lies within a UNESCO World Heritage site. We pitched our tents along a salt water lagoon that was the last undisturbed grey whale nursing ground in the world. There, Mitsubishi Chemicals and the Mexican government planned to build the world's largest industrial facility. The environmental group NRDC and their charismatic founder, John Adams, had invited a small group of us to see what we could do to protect these magnificent creatures.

One afternoon three of us took an 11-foot inflatable boat a mile out into the lagoon. Nursing whales and their calves surrounded us. A 30-foot-long mother, her calf trailing behind, headed directly toward our boat. Slowly, she slid under us, carefully lifting much of the boat into the air. Ever so gently, she then slid us back into the water. She and her calf turned and rolled alongside us.

That night I wandered over to the tent of the naturalist—Roger Payne, one of the world's greatest wildlife biologists—and asked him what could be done to help protect the world's whales. He suggested a film. Together with my partner Tim Disney, we would make "A Life Among Whales."

IDA: What inspired you to make "The Price of Sugar?"

BH: I stumbled across the story that is the center of "The Price of Sugar."

Together with Harvard's Children's Hospital, Tim Disney and I had started a nonprofit, Infante Sano, with the intention of delivering medical training and supplies to dramatically improve infant and maternal health care in Latin America. I was in the Dominican Republic bringing medical supplies to local hospitals when I was told of a charismatic priest building a new hospital for the poor. I went to meet him.

It didn't take long for the incredible passion and vision of Father Christopher Hartley to become clear. A longtime acolyte of Mother Teresa, his lifelong commitment to the poorest of the poor was inspiring. When I offered supplies for his hospital, surprisingly he asked if we would consider making a film instead. He saw the civil rights challenges his parishioners faced—most of them Haitians working on Dominican sugar plantations—as so severe that only engagement from Americans could help. Facing death threats as he stood against a powerful company, he saw the international media as a critical source of support. Inspired by his courage and vision, we agreed to make the film.

IDA: What were some of the challenges and obstacles in making this film, and how did you overcome them?

BH: Skipping over the more mundane challenges of crewing and financing a documentary, let me focus on three major issues.

Making a film in an isolated corner of the developing world, where different languages are spoken and where the local powers are hostile, poses some challenges. Telling a local story—that of a parish priest and his parishioners—where the national and international connections are so relevant, and doing so in a fair-minded, engaging and economical way can be complicated. Revealing a hidden world in a film that a powerful and wealthy family passionately wants to squash, and uses a broad array of attacks to keep audiences from seeing, has been a bit of an obstacle.

My strategy for dealing with these challenges is pretty simple. First, stand on the shoulders of giants. Newton said this about his work, of course, and while I am no Newton, my partners in this film—Eric Grunebaum, Peter Rhodes, Debra Longo, Claudio Ragazzi, Tom Camp, Jerry Risius, Eric Cochran, Nikki Bramley, Diana Trudell, Lori Joyal and my partner in all my films, Tim Disney—certainly are giants to me. They, and the countless others who worked to help us, made the challenges possible to overcome.

Second, we worked on a story that deeply moved me. By my lights, “The Price of Sugar” plumbs some of the most fundamental questions of the 21st century, and does so in an inspiring and deeply human way. Our story reveals the lives of some of the poorest people in the Americas—living next to some of the richest. My own emotional engagement with the principles at stake keeps me going when the obstacles seem highest.

Finally, a determination to let the sun shine on the inspiring lives of our central characters, several of whom believed they were risking their lives to work with us. If they could push forward with all their burdens, how could we falter?

IDA: How did your vision for the film change over the course of the pre-production, production and post-production processes?

BH: My sense of the heart of the film didn't really change much over the course of making the film. The tale of a parish priest, his struggle to care for his parishioners and the way he and his work connected to the wider world was our focus throughout. I never knew where that story would take us, of course, but I knew that was its heart.

IDA: As you've screened “The Price of Sugar”—whether on the festival circuit, or in screening rooms, or in living rooms—how have audiences reacted to the film? What has been most surprising or unexpected about their reactions?

BH: The audiences we have screened “The Price of Sugar” for have been extraordinarily generous with our film. It won the Audience Award at its first festival, South by Southwest, and has provoked penetrating questions on both macro-scale issues of morality, human rights, international trade and U.S. subsidy policy, and on more human-scale issues involving the lives of the film’s characters. I love the Q and A sessions.

Most surprising—and heartening—for me has been the passion and kinship audiences feel with the film’s characters. Haitian plantation workers and a Spanish priest are a long way from the daily experience of most audiences, but the direct connection between audience and character seems to happen quickly and deeply.

IDA: What docs or docmakers have served as inspirations for you?

BH: Terry Malick, Kevin Macdonald, Penelope Spheeris, RJ Cutler, Michael APTED and Errol Morris are among the filmmakers whose work inspires me. There are many, many others.

FR. CHRISTOPHER HARTLEY

Born in 1959, Father Christopher Hartley is an heir to the family that founded Britain's famous Hartley's Jams, and Pilar Sartorius Hartley, a member of the Spanish aristocracy. Although born in London, he spent most of his childhood and young adult life in Spain.

An athletic, fun-loving and largely irreligious child, Hartley attended Spain's finest schools and was popular among his classmates. Then, suddenly, at the age of 15 he felt called to God and with little explanation or notice, he dropped out of his esteemed private school and entered a seminary in Toledo, Spain. He was ordained a priest in 1982 by Pope John Paul II in Valencia, Spain.

In 1977 Father Christopher met Mother Teresa and worked by her side at the "Home for the Dying" in Kolkata (Calcutta). Driven by an overwhelming desire to serve the poor, he spent much of the next 20 years working with her and the Missionaries of Charity in impoverished communities around the world, including: Kolkata, remote villages in Spain, the South Bronx, New York and finally, the Dominican Republic.

In 1997 Father Christopher volunteered as a missionary at the Diocese of San Pedro de Macoris in the Dominican Republic. For nine years Father Christopher was responsible for a 600 square mile parish, based in the small town of San Jose de Los Llanos where he cared for his Dominican parishioners, and also tended to the needs of Haitian-Dominican sugarcane cutters living in impoverished conditions on the plantations within his parish. For three years he was in contact with the Vicini family, owners of one of the sugarcane plantations in order to gain better working and living conditions for the cane cutters. Regularly threatened with death and at times prohibited from entering the Vicini bateyes, Father Christopher battled to make the reality of these labor practices known all over the world. His parish worked much like an NGO, creating and building establishments such as a hospital, nutrition centers and schools. Under order of higher powers within the Church, he left the Dominican Republic in October, 2006. Since then he has been traveling to different Third World countries with Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Bill Haney, Director

Bill Haney is a partner, director, screenwriter, and producer with Uncommon Productions, an independent film production company with offices in Boston and Los Angeles.

His documentary credits include:

Producer: *The Road to Reconciliation*; covering Northern Ireland's Troubles, and highlighting the contributions of victims towards peace. Distributed on PBS.

Writer, producer, director: *Gift of the Game*; American baseball players retrace a league founded by Hemingway in 1940s Havana and explore U.S./Cuban relations. Distributed on PBS.

Writer, producer, director: *Racing Against the Clock*; follows five women striving to compete at the track and field World Masters Championships. Winner, Mass General Hospital/Harvard Medical School Humanitarian Award.

Director, producer: *A Life Among Whales*; a look at one man's lifelong passion for the wild. Selection, U.N. Association Film Festival. Winner, Earthwatch Film Award. PBS and National Geographic International distribution.

Tim Disney, Executive Producer

In 1999, Tim Disney co-founded the film production company Uncommon Productions. He made his directorial debut with the feature film *A Question of Faith* which premiered in competition at the Sundance Film Festival in January, 2000. In addition to directing the feature film *Tempesta*, Disney has recently served as Executive Producer on a variety of documentary and feature films, including: *Road to Reconciliation* (2002), *Gift of the Game* (2003), *Racing Against the Clock* (2005) and *Crusade In Jeans* (2006).

Tim Disney has served as president of The Glendower Group, a private investment firm, since 1998. From 1992 to 1998, he served as Chairman and CEO of Virtual World Entertainment, a leading developer of high-end entertainment software. In 1992, Disney produced the feature film *The Giving*, which was awarded the gold prize for best first feature at the Houston Worldfest Film Festival and distributed by Northern Arts Entertainment. Two years prior he co-created and produced the hit game show *Clash* for MTV Networks. In 1985, he joined the animation department at Walt Disney Studios where he co-wrote the screenplay for *Oliver and Company*, Disney's 1988 animated release.

Eric Grunebaum, Producer

Eric has written, produced, and directed documentary films and educational media for museums for 15 years. He co-produced and supervised post-production for Uncommon Productions' two most recent documentaries, the award winning films *Racing Against the Clock*, and *A Life Among Whales*, distributed by PBS and National Geographic Channels International.

Previously, he served as a lead producer, director, writer, and managing editor for museum projects at the Chedd-Angier Production Company. His exhibits are installed at cultural, art, and science museums countrywide including at Ellis Island, and the Portland Museum of Art.

Eric's prior film work as producer and associate producer includes programs for The Discovery Channel, Harvard Business School, and PBS.

Jerry Risius, Cinematographer

Based in New York City, Jerry has been working as a Director of Photography for motion picture and video productions since 1990. He served as DP on the National Geographic programs *Air Force One*, *Titanic Revisited* and *Tragedy in the Baltic Sea*. For Breakthru Films/HBO he shot and field produced *Chad Refugee Camps*. For Miramax Pictures he did cinematography for *Unzipped*. For Harpo he shot *Children/South Africa*. Jerry has worked extensively with the BBC and the Discovery Channel as well as UNICEF.

Jerry also served as a Peace Corps volunteer, and shot three films in Haiti: *2004: Haiti's Bicentennial*, *Rezistans*, and *VouDou*. He has served as an Adjunct Visiting Professor at the School of Visual Arts, New School for Social Research/Parsons in New York, and at the Maine Photo/Film Workshops.

Peter Rhodes, Editor

In addition to Peter's editing of Uncommon Productions' documentaries *Racing Against the Clock* and *Gift of the Game*, he has edited numerous programs for NOVA, Frontline and the American Experience at PBS.

His credits for Frontline include *Let's Get Married*, produced by Ben Loeterman, *Real Justice* produced by Lion TV/BBC as well as *Diet Wars* and *Harvest of Fear* both produced by John Palfreman - the latter winner of the Alfred I. duPont-Columbia Journalism Award.

For the American Experience Peter edited *Reconstruction* produced by Elizabeth Deane for WGBH, *Public Enemy #1* produced by Ben Loeterman, *Houdini* produced by Nancy Porter and *Race for the Superbomb* produced by Thomas Ott.

For NOVA, his programs include *The Most Dangerous Woman in America* produced by Nancy Porter, and *Case of the Serial Arsonist*, produced by WGBH. Peter trained at the BBC as a sound and film editor from 1982 to 1986.

Claudio Ragazzi, Composer

For the last fifteen years, Argentinean composer Claudio Ragazzi has been writing acclaimed music for film and television and performing with some of today's most respected musicians. The scope of his work covers Jazz, Latin American and classical guitar traditions.

Claudio was the composer for Uncommon Productions' film about Cuban baseball, *Gift of the Game*. His score for 1998's *Next Stop Wonderland*, for Miramax, was in the Top Ten on the Billboard charts for more than 12 weeks. His score for the independent feature *The Blue Diner* blended Cuban musical traditions with modern urban sounds. Claudio has also scored numerous television programs for the Discovery Channel, Animal Planet, National Geographic, Telemundo, Univision and PBS, including the children series *Sesame Street*, and multiple films for *American Experience*, and *NOVA*.

Claudio maintains an active schedule of performances worldwide both as a leader of his own projects as well as a side man with prominent musicians such as: Paquito D'Rivera, Joe Lovano and Pablo Ziegler. He played for the Tribute to Astor Piazzolla at Carnegie Hall with cellist Yo Yo Ma. Recently Claudio collaborated with vocalist and fellow Argentinean, Mili Bermejo on her latest release, 'Pienso el Sur'.

BIG SUGAR

Deeply intertwined with many politicians in both the United States and the Dominican Republic, the Dominican sugar industry has been for many years the beneficiary of some of the world's most distorted trade policies. Sugar in the United States is supported at up to twice world prices by preferentially negotiated import restrictions and quotas. Privileges to sell into the U.S. market are understandably highly prized and extremely valuable.

Donating to U.S. politicians at a rate more than six times other similar farm producers, the U.S. sugar industry has maintained these trade restrictions despite extraordinary pressure to free global trade. Sugar now receives proportionally more support from the U.S. government than any other major crop.

Yet even as Dominican sugar is permitted to charge up to double the world price – conveniently subsidized by American consumers – many of their cane cutters barely eat one meal a day.

At the beginning of harvest season, men are recruited in Haiti or picked up at the border with the complicity of the military and immigration authorities and the lure of good paying jobs. Once rounded up, they are loaded onto trucks, often stripped of their identification papers and moved into 'bateyes' under the cover of night so that they are kept disoriented. They are housed in primitive, often windowless barracks on company land that frequently lacks clean water, electricity and basic sanitary conditions.

As the "zafra" or harvest season begins, they work grueling hours wielding a machete. They have often earned less than \$1 a day, which at best, pays for a single meal. Children born on the batey are not recognized as Dominican citizens (despite the Dominican Constitution) and as a result have infrequent access to education and are often found working in the fields as well. There is little or no access to health care and instances of AIDS, TB, dengue fever and malaria are among the highest in the world. And the bateyes have until recently been patrolled by shotgun brandishing foremen. Those who try to question authority or refuse to work are either imprisoned or sent back to Haiti, often penniless, and without identification papers.

The troubled history and antipathy between Haiti and the Dominican Republic is deeply entrenched, while the vast majority of Dominicans are themselves impoverished – thus apathy and often outright hostility are often the rule.

The Price of Sugar – Fact Sheet

The United States and Dominican Republic Sugar Price Supports

- 100% of Dominican sugar exports end up in the American market.
- The United States sugar markets are highly protected with sugar prices historically set well-above world prices – from 40% higher in 2006 to more than double world prices in recent years. To maintain this system, foreign sugar imports are severely restricted, however quotas are handed out to a small group of favored countries which are permitted to sell into the U.S. market at the inflated U.S. prices.
- The Dominican Republic is at the top of the list, receiving the largest share of the U.S. import quotas. The top five country quota allocations for 2006 were:

Country	Metric Tons	U.S. (short) Tons
1. Dominican Republic	252,935	278,813
2. Brazil	208,384	
3. Philippines	194,012	
4. Australia	119,282	
5. Guatemala	68,982	

- The U.S. subsidies of Dominican sugar are a windfall for the D.R. industry at the expense of American consumers.

COMPARISON OF WORLD RAW SUGAR PRICE VS. U.S. RAW SUGAR PRICE 2004- 2006

YEAR	RAW SUGAR: WORLD PRICE (cents per lb.)	RAW SUGAR: U.S. PRICE (cents per lb.)	% ABOVE WORLD PRICE
2004	8.61	20.46 (> than double)	138%
2005	11.35	21.28 (nearly double)	87%
2006	15.5	22.14	43%

- Historical note: After the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the United States sugar quotas for Cuba were eliminated. The Dominican Republic assumed Cuba's former status as the main supplier under the quota system.

Sugar Production in the Dominican Republic

- Central Romana, the largest Dominican sugar producer is owned by the Cuban-American Fanjul family who also have vast U.S. sugar operations. The Vicini Group is the second largest Dominican sugar producer and counts the U.S. as one of its largest markets.
- Dominican Republic Sugar Production 2005-2006 Harvest

Company	Metric Tons
Central Romana	370,791
Vicini Group	60,551
Barahona	48,634
Porvenir (CEA)	10,374

- www.inazucar.gov.do

Sugar Production in the U.S. and the D.R.'s Share

- Total U.S. sugar production in 2006 was: 7,399 million tons.
- Approximately 60%, or 4,444 million tons was beet sugar.
- Approximately 40%, or 2,956 million tons was cane sugar.
- In 2007, the Dominican Republic's share of imports are projected to be approximately 10%+ of the total U.S. sugar imports. Over the past five years, the D.R.'s share of imports is typically in this range.

Haitians in the Dominican Republic

- "More than 20,000 Haitians cross the frontier each year to work in the sugarcane fields."
- *Paris Match - Match Du Monde, March-April 2006*
- "...approximately 650,000 undocumented Haitian immigrants – 7.5% of the country's population – live in shantytowns or sugarcane work camps known as bateyes, harsh environments with limited or no electricity, usually no running water, and no adequate schooling."
- *2006 U.S. State Dept. Human Rights Report on the Dominican Republic*
- "Extreme poverty, discrimination or fear of deportation often prevents the [batey] population from freely participating in the Dominican mainstream society. Most no longer have links to Haiti. The situation inside those bateyes is a humanitarian crisis of a unique proportion as generations of Dominican children born of undocumented Haitians are prohibited from obtaining a birth certificate making it difficult to attend school or access health services. At a young age, malnutrition, parasitic ailments, diarrhea, and other preventable diseases plague many Dominican and Haitian children. Others are left abandoned or orphaned as their parents are infected by or have succumbed to HIV/AIDS."
- *From the Batey Relief Alliance, 4/17/06*

Sugar Consumption in the U.S.

- Average refined sucrose sugar consumption in the U.S. is approximately 61.5 lbs. per person per year. This can be obtained from roughly 205 stalks of sugarcane.
- <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/SC032>
- U.S. sugar is consumed as follows: 32% as packaged sugar, 20% in bakery and cereal products, 15% in confectionery products, 6% in dairy products, 5% in processed foods, and 4% in beverages.
- <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/SC032>

Sources of Fair Trade Sugar: Look for these logos when buying sugar



HAITI-DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: Film on Plantations Spurs Backlash

By Michael Deibert

Inter Press Service

NEW YORK, Jun 4 (IPS) - When a man stood up at the Paris screening of director Amy Serrano's "The Sugar Babies", demanding to know how one of the film's subjects, the Belgian priest Pedro Ruquoy, could afford such a large car on his priestly salary, Ruquoy was nonplussed.



Credit:Walter Astrada

Armed sugar cane field guard in Dominican Republic.

Ruquoy, who had ministered to Haitian workers in the sugarcane fields of the Dominican Republic for 30 years before being driven from the country amidst death threats in 2005, replied that, for the first several years of his time in the country, he rode a mule, and from then on, a motorcycle.

The mysterious protestor was apparently attempting to criticise another film, "The Price of Sugar" by Bill Haney, which traces the similar struggles of the Anglo-Spanish priest Father Christopher Hartley. In the film, Hartley is seen driving a 4x4 over the roads of the eastern Dominican Republic.

Due to technical problems at the Esclaves au Paradis (Slaves in Paradise) conference in Paris, which sought to explore what organisers say are the appalling conditions of Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic, the screening times of the two films had been reversed under short notice.

"It was strange that the questions were totally unrelated to film we had just screened," says Anne Lescot, the coordinator of the colloquium and its film programmer. "They had obviously been prepared for the other film."

However disjointed, the mysterious man's interjections appeared of a piece with similar interruptions and protests that have greeted events attempting to discuss the ever-more contentious issue of the treatment of the estimated 650,000 to one million undocumented Haitians living in the Dominican Republic, fleeing the political violence and economic stagnation of their often-tumultuous homeland.

Though these immigrants have traditionally laboured in the sugarcane fields, known as bateyes, controlled by individuals such as the Cuban-American sugar barons Alfonso and Pepe Fanjul, and the wealthy Dominican Vicini family (owners of the Grupo Vicini collection of companies and of the Diario Libre newspaper), recently Haitians have also taken jobs in such urban endeavors as construction, auto repair and working in the country's booming resorts.

In a recent cease-and-desist order sent to the makers of "The Price of Sugar", the Washington law firm Patton Boggs (which had previously represented the government of ousted Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide), acting on behalf of the Grupo Vicini -- subjects of scathing criticism in the film -- outlined what it claimed were 45 defamatory statements against the corporation in the movie. The objections ranged from the Grupo Vicini's contention that its workers were not under armed guard, to allegations that some of those depicted in the film as living in sub-standard conditions on the bateys were not in fact batey employees.

"I don't know why these people are going after not only the sugar operations of the Vicini family but sugar operations in the Dominican Republic in general," Read McCaffrey, the lead counsel at Paton Boggs representing the company, told IPS. "I've gone through the bateys and seen conditions that are

significantly better than those in this documentary. It is unfortunate that the film is being shown as something accurate when it is propaganda."

In response to some of the charges, Father Christopher Hartley, the priest portrayed in the film, produced to IPS over a dozen still photographs from 2003-2004 of armed men that he says were taken in and around Vicini-controlled sugar operations. In many of the photos, the men carrying pump-action shotguns are wearing baseball caps bearing the logo of the Ingenio Cristóbal Colón, a Grupo Vicini-controlled sugar complex on the outskirts of the Dominican city of San Pedro de Macorís.

"I believe that it is unworthy of the human person to exist in the living and working conditions that were present within the boundaries of my parish," Hartley, who has been the object of great vilification in some quarters of the Dominican media, told IPS from his home in Spain, where he has lived since being forced out of his community deep in sugar territory on 2006. "It is an intrinsic aspect of my pastoral mission to do the utmost to help these people defend their dignity, and their human rights."

Supporting Hartley's position, a prize-winning reporter for a major South Florida daily newspaper, present during the filming of scenes in "The Price of Sugar" and speaking on the condition of anonymity, has confirmed the general conditions it depicts of life in the bateys as accurate. Though the reporter feels that certain elements of the film might have been exaggerated for dramatic effect, the reporter said that the abysmal living and working conditions of Haitians working in Grupo Vicini-controlled bateys are largely true.

"Everything (Hartley) said about those conditions, he didn't need to say it," the reporter told IPS. "When you walked around in the bateys, you could see that people were living in bad conditions, were defeated, it was a miserable life. You didn't need words to explain it, it was there."

"The Price of Sugar" is not the only target of controversy.

To help shape its public image, the Grupo Vicini has also retained the services of Newlink, a Miami-based public relations and consulting firm founded and run by former television journalist Sergio Roitberg. In addition to the Grupo Vicini, Newlink's clients include the Policia Nacional of the Dominican Republic and the Partido de la Liberación Dominicana, (PLD), the political party of Dominican president Leonel Fernández .

At the Paris symposium, several witnesses charge that Roitberg, in addition to vociferously interrupting a question-and-answer session following an address by Father Hartley, used strong language to threaten a French-Peruvian photographer, Céline Anaya Gautier, who spent two years documenting the lives of Haitians in the bateys and whose photographs form a large part of the exhibition.

"We know who you are, we know where you live," Roitberg is alleged to have said to Gautier, an account that she confirms. "Be very careful."

Newlink and Roitberg did not respond to IPS requests for comment.

The road for those agitating on behalf of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent has never been an easy one.

Sonia Pierre, a Dominican of Haitian descent who leads the Movimiento De Mujeres Dominico Haitiana (MUDHA), was part of a legal team that, in September 2005, successfully argued before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights that the Dominican Republic was in violation of five articles of the American Convention on Human Rights Pact of San Jose, Costa Rica in denying citizenship to two young girls, Dilcia Yean and Violeta Bosico, born in the Dominican Republic.

That decision reinforced that, in its denial of citizenship to persons born within its borders, the Dominican Republic was in violation of Article 11 of its own constitution, which guarantees Dominican citizenship to the all those born within its territory save for those "in transit" and the children of foreign diplomats.

For her efforts, Pierre, a 2006 recipient of the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, has been the subject of attempts by members of the Dominican congress to revoke her citizenship, despite the fact that she was born and raised in the country.

Dominican Foreign Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso, one of the bitterest critics of the newly-assertive Haitian presence in the Dominican Republic and of Pierre in particular, has a long-standing relationship as an executive and major shareholder of the Central Romana sugar concern, along with the aforementioned Fanjuls. (END/2007