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HEADLINE: Cuba paid debts with forced labor, lawsuit says;
A Miami federal court case offers a rare glimpse at employment terms normally kept secret between Cuba and the firms it deals with.

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BODY:

Each Cuban worker got two pairs of overalls, a set of sturdy boots, a helmet and food commensurate with how hard he worked.

Their labor fixing up American cruise ships at a Curacao dry dock was valued at \$6.90 an hour. But the 108 Cuban shipyard hands who worked double shifts in a joint venture between the Cuban government and the Curacao Dry Dock Company did not get to spend their wages. Their earnings were applied to the Cuban government's debt with the company, court records show.

Documents reviewed Wednesday by The Miami Herald in an ongoing 2006 lawsuit filed in Miami by the workers offer a rare glimpse at employment terms normally kept secret between the Cuban government and the firms with which it does business. The documents appear to offer proof that the government's joint ventures abroad sometimes involve unpaid labor.

Instead of a salary, the men got money for food and 400 Cuban pesos a month -- about \$18 at the current exchange rate.

Three former dry-dock workers eventually escaped what their attorneys call a "forced labor camp" in Willemstad, Curacao, and filed the suit in U.S. District Court in Miami, alleging the Cuban government offered them up as slave labor to pay off its debts.

Alberto Justo Rodriguez, Fernando Alonso Hernandez and Luis Alberto Casanova Toledo -- who now live in the Tampa Bay area -- sued the Curacao Dry Dock Company, saying it forced them to work against their will while Cuban agents kept an eye on their every move.

Their boss at the docks: Fidel Castro's nephew.

In court papers, the Curacao Dry Dock Company says allegations it forced employees to work 112 hours a week in substandard conditions are untrue. In a sweeping denial of wrongdoing, the company acknowledged it did not pay the Cubans and that managers held the workers' passports "for safekeeping."

Cuba paid debts with forced labor, lawsuit says; A Miami federal court case offers a rare glimpse at employment terms normally kept secret between Cuba and the firms it deals with. The Miami Herald Ju

"Because of the significant debt owed by . . . Havana to defendant for repairing ships . . . monies that defendant would otherwise pay to the Havana shipyard for the provision of temporary workers from Cuba are subtracted from the debt owed by the shipyard," the company's attorneys wrote in a court filing.

The suit was filed under the Alien Tort Statute, which allows foreigners to file civil suits in U.S. federal courts when a serious international law has been violated. It was unclear how much the Cuban government owed the company.

The court filing responding to the lawsuit added that the workers got a per diem and "additional benefits." Employment contracts show the men were supposed to receive \$1,500 a month for a per diem, but the workers say they received only a \$12 daily food allotment to spend at the company store.

Court documents also show that the dock's production manager was Manuel de Jesus Bequer Soto Del Valle, the nephew of Fidel Castro's wife, Dalia Soto Del Valle. The records show Bequer's employment ended in April 2007 and he later sued the company.

Without detailing the cause of his lawsuit, the records show the company settled for \$125,000.

Asked what Bequer was like, plaintiff Alonso Hernandez said through his Miami attorney, Orlando do Campo: "Manuel Bequer was a despot -- a Nazi. He had no regard for our health or well-being and personally put me in dangerous and hazardous situations. His only concern was to exploit the Cuban laborers to the fullest extent possible."

The men said they worked 3 p.m. to 7 a.m. shifts 15 days in a row. They got days off only when the docks were empty, attorney John Andres Thornton said.

In the suit, attorneys allege that the Cuban government and the Curacao Dry Dock company formed the joint venture to repair ships as a way to skirt the U.S. trade embargo against the communist nation.

Now Thornton said the Cuban government has enacted revenge on the plaintiffs' families -- who are still on the island -- by refusing their children access to day care and higher education.

The Curacao Dry Dock Company did not show up for depositions scheduled in Miami last week, and its Boca Raton attorneys want off the case. At a hearing Wednesday before U.S. District Judge James L. King, attorney Stephanie Traband asked the court to allow her Boca Raton firm, Proskauer Rose, to be removed from the case, citing irreconcilable differences.

The workers' attorneys assert Curacao Dry Dock is trying to dodge the case -- and a financial judgment against the firm -- by not cooperating in the suit.

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