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The Miami Herald

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The Miami Herald

October 21, 2008 Tuesday

SECTION: A; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 814 words

HEADLINE: Three Cuban workers who escaped awarded \$80 million;
Three Cuban workers were awarded \$80 million in their suit against a firm that worked with Cuba.

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BODY:

Three Cuban men forced to work 16-hour shifts at 30 cents an hour repairing ships for a Cuban joint venture in Curacao won an \$80 million judgment Monday in U.S. federal court in Miami.

Alberto Justo Rodríguez, Fernando Alonso Hernández and Luis Alberto Casanova Toledo -- Cuban nationals who now live in Tampa -- sued the Curacao Drydock Co., alleging the company conspired with the Cuban government to force them into virtual slave labor.

Lawyers called the deal a "Faustian bargain" hatched so the Cuban government could pay off its debt with Curacao Drydock by providing free labor, and at the same time skirt the U.S. embargo by working on American ships in a third country.

"These arrangements have been the lifeblood of the regime for 15 years," attorney John Andres Thornton said. "And those days are over."

The plaintiffs tearfully testified about their 3 p.m. to 7 a.m. shifts -- sometimes 45 days straight -- in harsh and dangerous work conditions. They slept in 20-foot cubicles they shared with 20 other men and often did not sleep: They needed to stay up for their turn at the shower.

On their time off, they were forced to watch hourslong videotaped speeches of then-President Fidel Castro. They were paid the average Cuban salary of \$16 a month.

Alonso, who has a shrunken frame and weathered face that belie his 43 years, was awarded \$30 million for the 10 years he spent at the Curacao docks. His right hand is missing the index finger and the tip of the middle finger; his left is blackened by an untreated on-the-job explosion.

"I have never even seen \$1,000 together," Alonso said after the judgment. "I feel complete. We are in the best country in the world for justice."

PASSPORTS SEIZED

Three Cuban workers who escaped awarded \$80 million; Three Cuban workers were awarded \$80 million in their suit against a firm that worked with Cuba. The Miami Herald October 21, 2008 Tuesday

The men told U.S. District Judge James L. King how they hid work injuries so they would not get into trouble. Their passports were seized and they were threatened with imprisonment by their supervisor, Manuel de Jesus Bequer Soto Del Valle, Fidel Castro's nephew by marriage.

King decided the evidence was "overwhelming and uncontradicted" and awarded the full amount requested. Rodríguez and Casanova were awarded \$25 million each.

The men won their lawsuit in August, after attorneys for Curacao Drydock quit the case and the company failed to show up for any further hearings. King issued a default verdict in the ship workers' favor and held a separate trial for damages on Monday.

Attorneys Seth Miles and Stuart Z. Grossman of Grossman Roth and Thornton and Orlando do Campo of do Campo & Thornton showed that the Curacao Drydock Co. hired at least 100 Cubans to repair cruise ships and oil tankers at its dock in Willemstad, Curacao.

Court records showed that instead of paying the men a lawful wage, the Curacao company applied their \$6.90 hourly value to the Cuban government's debt with the firm.

ESCAPED

The men eventually escaped, going first to Venezuela and later to Colombia. In 2006, they sought refuge at the U.S. embassy when they learned that Cuban state security agents escorting athletes to the Central American Games in Cartagena had been looking for them.

They moved to Florida and later sued the company in U.S. District Court in Miami 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.

"Great novels and films are made out of this collective experience -- and they lived it," Grossman said, comparing the case to the 1839 slave mutiny aboard the Amistad.

'WE WILL CHASE THEM'

The lawyers said they could collect the judgment by filing liens or attaching monies owed to the company by American corporations.

"If they put us through difficulties and hoops, we will chase them down," Grossman said.

"If they expect to do business with American companies, they will have to do right by these men," Miles added.

The plaintiffs said the victory would not be complete until they are reunited with their families. They testified that their relatives in Cuba have been fired from their jobs, kicked out of schools and harassed by their neighbors.

Alonso dropped his head and wept when he talked about his daughter who is 21 and faces an uncertain future, because the Cuban government does not allow her to go to college.

"My father lost his job -- everyone did. Something has been done to all of my family," Rodríguez, 43, said. "I got what I wanted, but at the cost of my family. At least I can feel happy that now everyone knows that those corporations are sustaining Fidel, not the people."

Rodríguez has not seen his 4-year-old son since he was a newborn.

Casanova's father, an engineer at the Cuban dry dock, disowned him.

Now he suffers from depression and cannot work, he said.

"This is a free country, but my life here is senseless," Casanova, 29, testified. "I am free, but alone. My life no longer has any meaning. They have destroyed me and my family."

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