Grupo Pellas/Nicaragua Sugar Estates Limited re deaths caused by chronic kidney disease among workers at San Antonio sugar mill in Chichigalpa, Nicaragua

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Business & Human Rights Resource Centre invited Grupo Pellas/Nicaragua Sugar Estates Limited to respond to the following items:

- *Males renales*, *pesadilla en CA*, 16 de diciembre 2012, José Meléndez, El Universal [México] http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/internacional/80566.html

- *CKD [Chronic Kidney Disease]*, Americas Now, 7 de enero 2013, http://english.cntv.cn/program/americasnow/20130107/103612.shtml

Grupo Pellas/Nicaragua Sugar Estates Limited sent us the following response.

RESPONSE OF GRUPO PELLAS COMMUNICATION OFFICE TO ALLEGATIONS ABOUT DISEASES CAUSED TO ITS WORKERS AT THE INGENIO SAN ANTONIO (ISA) IN CHICHIGALPA, NICARAGUA.

Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) is a multicausal illness that exists all over the world. An unusual form of the disease has been observed not only in Nicaragua, but also in the Central American Pacific region and in countries such as India and Sri Lanka, which affects diverse occupational categories, and so far no specific causes have been determined that explain it.

Until now, no scientific study has established a link of causality between the sugar labor and Chronic Kidney Disease.

The most thorough investigation carried on to date is the one that Boston University School of Public Health has been undertaking in Nicaragua since the past couple of years, INDUSTRIAL HYGIENE/OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT: Evaluating Potential Hazards Associated with Chemicals and Work Practices at the Ingenio San Antonio *(ISA)* (Chichigalpa, Nicaragua).

In its report of August 30, 2010, Boston University states: *"(…) We have concluded that none of the current work practices or the chemicals used by ISA are generally accepted causes of CRI. This conclusion does not rule out the possibility that one or more of these agents might in fact cause CRI, but new scientific knowledge and insights will be necessary to establish whether any link actually exists. (…)"*
(http://www.cao-ombudsman.org/cases/document-links/documents/FINALIHReport-AUG302010-ENGLISH.pdf)

Three subsequent reports from Boston University reflect that there is no current scientific evidence that links the agrochemicals used in the sugarcane cultivation to kidney disease; however, more studies are being done to continue investigating its causes.

Nicaragua Sugar, a company belonging to Grupo Pellas, and owner of San Antonio sugar mill, has provided its full cooperation to all these studies, giving unrestricted access to its facilities, opening its archives and providing all the information available.

On February 2009, under the auspices of the Office of the Compliance Advisor/Ombudsman – CAO - of the World Bank, a dialogue was initiated between Nicaragua Sugar and Asochivida, the most representative association of kidney patients in the western region of the country (it comprises more than 95% of the affected people), in order to identify and address the causes of CKD and explore ways to alleviate the situation of the families affected by the disease.

The results of this dialogue have been extremely positive and among its most notable achievements is the investigative work being done by Boston University and the substantial aid the Company has provided to Asochivida members.

It is important to highlight what CAO stated in a press release on January 26, 2012:
"(…) Boston University's work builds on that of other researchers and indicates that the unusual form of CKD observed in former NSEL workers is prevalent throughout the Pacific zone of Central America, goes beyond sugarcane workers impacting workers in other industries, and has also been identified in Asia. (…) Boston University's work is unprecedented in Nicaragua considering its scope, rigor, and unrestricted access to the company's operations. (…) Medical needs for the sick are profound, particularly in light of the lack of options for medication, dialysis, and kidney transplant. These needs are being addressed by proposed improvements to the community health center in Chichigalpa. NSEL and ASOCHIVIDA are also working together to provide food aid, develop a microcredit program, and provide income generation projects to support affected community members. Throughout the dialogue process, NSEL has provided about US$4 million in support to community members through ASOCHIVIDA. (…) "Given the scope and magnitude of this disease, long term solutions will likely require a regional framework for research into its cause, inevitably linked to public policy." said Meg Taylor, CAO and Vice President, World Bank Group. (http://www.cao-ombudsman.org/cases/document-links/documents/Mediastatement_Nicaraguachronickidneydisease_012612.pdf)

Productive practices at San Antonio Sugar Mill are the same that the sugar industry uses internationally.

Moreover, ISA uses mechanical and biological pest control, which has eliminated almost entirely the use of pesticides, and the products that are used not only have the endorsement of relevant government institutions, but are also known for their safety and are registered at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Furthermore, various studies have been undertaken by both domestic and foreign specialized institutions to determine the quality of groundwater, and at the same time periodic internal analysis are carried out in the potable water wells at San Antonio.

All the results have indicated that analyzed waters are acceptable for human consumption.

For its part, the study PHASE I ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING: April 2010 Assessment of Water Samples, conducted by Boston University School of Public Health and presented in August, 2010, said: *"Accordingly, at the time samples were collected at the six locations included in the first phase of the environmental sampling program, none of the chemicals analyzed were present at concentrations above US EPA drinking water criteria and therefore are not believed to be harmful to human health." (http://www.cao-ombudsman.org/cases/document-links/documents/Water_sampling_report_August2010.pdf)*

Working conditions at San Antonio are widely known in Nicaragua because of their exemplary nature, making it worthy of multiple honors, including 8 “Excellency” awards in the last 12 years, granted by the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, conformed by the Ministry of Labor and other public and private organizations.

Besides, field workers, such as cane cutters, receive adequate hydration for the labor they perform in the form of water and hydrating solutions certified by the Ministry of Health, a balanced lunch prepared by a specialized company, food aid for their families, and medical care at San Antonio’s Hospital. Health promoters give daily talks about the pauses to be observed in the process of cutting the cane and a constant educational effort is made in order to teach the worker not to overexert himself and to work according to the pace of his physical condition.

Finally, San Antonio Sugar Mill is a landmark in Central America because of its Social Responsibility policies, which translate into benefits for workers, help for the communities and environmental protection.

For example, permanent workers receive: free pre-school, elementary and secondary education for all their children, free health services at the San Antonio Hospital, one of the few companies in Latin America that has a modern hospital for its workforce, scholarships for technical careers and college degrees, training, monthly food aid equivalent to a 60% subsidy of basic food basket, fourteen month of salary, bonuses, etc.

Annually, important projects are undertaken to benefit communities located near the Company, such as the construction and repair of schools, electrification and sanitation works, construction of parks, donation of school supplies, free medical attention, etc.

San Antonio Sugar Mill invests more than 5 million dollars each year in its Social Responsibility policies.