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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

BITTERSWEET: The Real Price of Sugar

Christian Aid (1992: 17 minutes)

Transcribed by Darrell G. Moen

Narrator: In October 1492, Christopher Columbus reached the island of Ciscaya. He changed its name to Hispaniola, the Spanish Isle. He said it was the most beautiful place that human eyes had ever seen. He praised the friendly nature of its people, the Arawak. Fifty years later, the local population had been decimated by violence and disease. The conquest of the New World had begun.

500 years have passed since Columbus first arrived here. The Dominican Republic which occupies half of the island today celebrates the anniversary. The main attraction of the celebrations is the Columbus lighthouse, a huge monument in the shape of a recumbent cross. In a country where 40% of the people don't have electricity, the lighthouse will beam thousands of watts into the Santo Domingo sky.

Unidentified woman in the street: Even today, 500 years after setting foot in our country, Columbus is doing us harm! Look at them - building a lighthouse and spending millions [of dollars] and here food is so expensive. Why didn't they build a hospital or a polytechnical institute?

Narrator: As has happened throughout the history of the island, ordinary people are being pushed aside. Those living near the lighthouse have had their homes demolished. Some are being rehoused, most have been hidden out-of-sight behind a wall. Some Dominicans are proud of their Spanish heritage.

But the pattern of inequality and exploitation set up by Columbus is still present today. Almost half the population are unemployed. 40% don't have access to safe water or health care. How beneficial to the people of the island was their encounter with Columbus?

Unidentified woman: Here, even to afford medication, to worry is a struggle, to get food is a struggle, to find work is a struggle. Just to scrape to get two or three pesos is such a struggle. Look, my husband goes off every morning to find any kind of work,

and he comes back home usually without a penny. You just have to put up with [this life], you are forced to.

Unidentified man: I haven't had breakfast and I'm hungry. It's almost midday and I haven't had breakfast. How do you expect me to feel? Is it God's will for us to live like this? What can we do?

Narrator: Soon after his arrival, Columbus lay the foundations of a trade system between the two worlds that would last throughout history. He began with a gold mining venture using Arawaks as the labor force. But there wasn't as much gold as he had imagined, and in a few years the gold had run out and the native population was almost extinct. Columbus had to find a new way of producing wealth for Europe. The answer was a product which at the time was a luxury as expensive as silver. Some called it "white gold." It was sugar.

Antonio Florian (General Secretary of Fenazucar): After the gold mines were exhausted, the sugar industry was started, and with it came Black slaves to the Dominican Republic and to the whole Carribean, wherever they grew cane.

Narrator: The sugar industry, fueled by slave labor, made the Dominican Republic one of the world's major producers for almost 60 years. The trade plans of the colonizers shaped the identity of Hispaniola. The culture of the African slaves has survived, and is still vibrant today. Sugar has also remained central to the country's economic life. But in the world trade system, sugar is no longer "white gold."

Antonio Florian (General Secretary of Fenazucar): Before, the flowering of the cane meant happiness in the community because it marked the start of the harvest. Not anymore. Now, the harvest [time] is as bad as any other time. Maybe for the children it still means something because with the flower stems they make kites.

Narrator: The first boom of Dominican sugar was short-lived. The colonial masters moved on to more profitable lands. Columbus' favorite place became a neglected colonial outpost. Today, the ailing sugar industry follows the same fate as many Third World countries used by colonial powers as suppliers of raw materials. The prices of these raw materials have fallen lower and lower, and with them the quality of life of the people.

Rayen Quiroga (Economist INTEC University): The problem is that it is a market in which there is too much supply and very little demand. And on top of that, those on the demand side are organized and are all working together, and they coordinate their actions in terms of pricing and quantities. It's a situation which economists call "imperfect competition" because there is no real competition between supply and demand.

Narrator: The rich countries now produce their own sugar. And the amounts they buy from places like the Dominican Republic are determined more by politics and post-colonial remorse than by economics. As prices in the world market have continued to fall, the Dominican Republic has relied more and more on cheap labor from Haiti, its neighboring country.

Edwin Paraison (Episcopal Church): This relationship between cane and Black slave labor has persisted throughout the history of the island. That's why even today, a cane cutters' work is seen as semi-slavery.

Narrator: The cane cutters live in compounds called "bateys" far away from the cities, close to the sugar fields. As many as seven people live in single-room barracks without water or electricity. Recently, human rights groups denounced the condition of the workers to an international tribunal in Geneva. Their evidence was so compelling that the U.S. Congress threatened to impose trade sanctions if the situation wasn't improved. But there is little visible change although salaries have increased.

Now, they earn the equivalent of one pound sterling for every ton of cane they cut and gather. That's an average wage of three pounds sterling a day.

Camille: When the harvest is over, you still have to find some way of getting food. If you don't grab your hoe, you don't eat. You have to work all the time.

Narrator: Camille is 82. He's been working in the cane fields for 68 years. During the eight-hour day, a bottle of coffee is all he can afford to keep him going.

Camille: Look. I want to tell you something. Look where I live. See? Look at my house. And I work every single day [seven days a week] for the company. If you don't work, you are [kicked] out of your house. You're out! I have to keep working to stay here [in this dump]!

Narrator: Luciene, Camille's wife also works to earn the few extra pesos that will buy them food.

Luciene: I make cassava bread and sell it. I do cooking. I do washing. I go and sell things around the sugar mill. I do a bit of everything.

Narrator: Although sugar is no longer the main source of foreign exchange for the country, it still plays an important part in the Dominican economy. The old production methods are surprisingly efficient. Even if the workers were paid fair wages, the industry would still be much more cost effective than its Western counterparts [producing beet sugar or corn sugar]. Nonetheless, whenever possible, the richer

countries replace imported raw materials with their own products. There are many substitutes for sugar cane. There is sugar produced from corn and maize in the United States. The European Community has also developed its own substitute.

Rayen Quiroga (Economist at INTEC University): In Europe, what they are doing is producing sugar from sugar beet. From being importer a few years ago, they've now become exporters. They didn't just become self-sufficient, they're actually exporting it now.

Narrator: The European Community is now the world's biggest sugar exporter. With the help of subsidies and guaranteed markets, European farmers produce much more than Europe needs. The surplus is dumped on the world sugar market, pushing world prices down.

Antonio Florian (General Secretary Fenazucar): This policy of protecting European producers, of promoting sugar beet cultivation, of making their own sugar, directly affects our economy and reduces the salaries and living conditions of the sugar workers, and of the whole country.

Narrator: The irony is that since sugar costs more to produce in Europe, consumers here end up paying higher prices to cover the cost of subsidized production. Meanwhile, sugar workers in places like the Dominican Republic go hungry.

Dagoberto Tejada (Anthropologist): Sugar, to us, is a symbol of our dependency. It's a symbol of our "underdevelopment." It's something that, instead of sweetening us, leaves us with a bitter taste. We celebrate the 500th anniversary. 500 years in which Spain is the symbol of Europe. From the start, the relationship has been one of imposition, exploitation, and domination. And although they talk today of our foreign debt and how much we owe them, we believe that it should be completely the other way around. Because all that we owe them, they took away from here.

Camille: We're the ones who suffer. We work in the sun. We work in the rain. And we don't see the benefits of the sugar. The ones who see the benefits are you over there, not us. Where do poor people go? We can only eat what you leave behind. [Interviewer: "So what's the solution?"] The solution for me is to have enough money to eat, to survive; for God to give me the strength to get by. Without money, what can I do? Live like a snake, dragging myself along looking for lizards to eat, as snakes do to survive. That's how we are here. That's how we live here.

Antonio Florian (General Secretary Fenazucar): We think that public opinion in Europe, the right-minded people, that the progressive sectors of Europe, can and must put pressure on their leaders to adopt a policy toward Third World countries which allows the establishment of an international trade system where the rules of the game

are defined by equality. Not an unequal trade system like we have today where they [in the rich countries] fix the prices for everything, for what they buy, for what they sell. For their products, the prices are high; for our products, prices are low.

We need to set up a fair trade system between the countries of the North and those of the South.

Narrator: All products have a history behind them. The history of sugar is full of death, exploitation, and slavery. That slavery, the driving force of the first sugar industry in America 500 years ago, ended in the 19th century because concerned people fought for its abolition. And yet, in more subtle forms, it still goes on.

Interviewer: What would make things better for you in the future?

Camille: Not just for me. I want a better deal for everyone.

Interviewer: So when are you going to stop cutting cane?

Camille: When I die. Then I'll stop working. I won't work anymore up there. I'll be up there, in God's hands, and the cane will still be down here, on earth.