

The Volkswagen Case in the Amazon: Structural Inequality, Contemporary Slavery, Human Trafficking, and Corporate Relations with the Brazilian Military Dictatorship

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Abstract The article analyzes the Volkswagen case in the Amazon to reflect on the context of contemporary slave labor and structural inequality in Brazil. Based on a study of the economic policy of the Brazilian military dictatorship and Volkswagen's business relations with the regime, it investigates the legal proceedings that recognized the company's responsibility for subjecting workers to contemporary slavery and human trafficking, with the declaration of the imprescriptibility of serious human rights violations.

Keywords Structural inequality. Contemporary slave labor. Human trafficking. Amazon. Brazilian military dictatorship.

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1 Introduction

On August 29, 2025, Brazil's press reported: "Volkswagen is fined R\$ 165 million for slave labor during the dictatorship" (Repórter Brasil 2025).

On September 15, 2025, in Germany: the Federation of Critical Shareholders and Brazilian Initiative Freiburg e.V. issued an open letter to the members of Volkswagen's Board of Management and Supervisory Board stating: "Urteilsspruch in Brasilien muss angenommen werden" (the sentence in Brazil must be accepted) (Dachverband der Kritischen Aktionärinnen 2025).

On August 29, 2025, labor judge Otávio Bruno da Silva Ferreira of the Labor Court of Redenção, of the Regional Labor Court of the 8th Region (RLC-8), in a public civil action filed by the Public Ministry of Labor (PML), ordered Volkswagen do Brasil Indústria de Veículos Automotores Ltda. (Volkswagen Brasil) to pay R\$165 million for collective moral damages, following a public civil action filed by the Public Ministry of Labor (PML). The ruling was based on evidence establishing that workers were subjected to contemporary slave labor and human trafficking at the Vale do Rio Cristalino Farm (referred to as the Volkswagen Farm), located in Santana do Araguaia, in southeastern Pará, during the Brazilian military dictatorship. On November 27, 2025, new individual lawsuits were filed.

Investigations revealed that between 1974 and 1986, hundreds of workers at the Volkswagen Farm were subjected to contemporary slavery, facing degrading working conditions, precarious and unsanitary housing, lack of access to drinking water and medical care, exhausting working hours, armed surveillance and restriction of freedom, and debt slavery, in which workers were lured and kept under financial and physical control, in addition to reports of abandonment of sick people and possible murders. Workers for temporary activities were recruited by intermediaries in various states of the country, notably the states of Goiás, Mato Grosso, Tocantins, and Pará, and taken to the farm to cut down the forest, build fences and firebreaks for protection, prepare the land for cattle breeding, and work in construction. Upon arrival, they were forced into debt bondage by having to buy kitchen utensils, tarpaulins (tarps) for building shelters, and food at exorbitant prices in shacks controlled by the company itself. If they tried to leave, they would need written authorization, which was kept by the guards at the farm's gatehouse.

The Vale do Rio Cristalino Farm was acquired by Volkswagen do Brasil through its subsidiary Companhia Vale do Rio Cristalino Agropecuária Comércio e Indústria (CVRC) established in 1973. The property covered 139,000 hectares and was used for livestock farming and timber extraction, both for the foreign market. The project

received financing and incentives from the Amazon Development Authority (Sudam) and Banco da Amazônia, as part of the military regime's policy of occupation of the Amazon.

The Volkswagen Case is part of the military government's broader efforts to implement projects in the Brazilian Amazon region, which accounts for approximately 60% of the country's territory. Based on the political and economic discourse of integrating the region into the country's productive centers, the government created tax and financial incentives policies for domestic and foreign businesses to invest in the region. However, on the other hand, this policy resulted in: the violation of labor legislation, contemporary slave labor, the privatization and concentration of public lands, and violence against squatters, both old and new, riverine and indigenous peoples, in addition to environmental degradation resulting from uncontrolled land use.

In this scenario, violence in rural areas and contemporary slave labor are also results of structural inequality in Brazilian society. Since the colonial period, Brazil has experienced an inequitable distribution of property, perpetuated nowadays, with agrarian conflicts that endanger the lives of the most vulnerable populations (Carvalho 2023, 2). This scenario is part of everyday life in Latin American countries that have monoculture farming, mining, and extractive practices through slave labor as chapters in the history of their colonization (Held, Botelho 2020).

This article aims to analyze the Volkswagen case to reflect on the context of contemporary slave labor and structural inequality in Brazil. To achieve this general objective, we investigate the economic policy of the Brazilian military dictatorship and its impact on the deepening of inequalities, followed by the legal proceedings that recognized Volkswagen's responsibility for subjecting workers to contemporary slavery and human trafficking.

In terms of methodology, this is a qualitative bibliographic and documentary study. The bibliographic research draws on previously analyzed works in the field of study, while the documentary research involves materials that have not yet been analyzed, such as the legal proceedings, which will be addressed based on the theoretical framework that allows for the interpretation of the information contained in the official documentation.

2 **The Economic Policy of the Military Dictatorship, Volkswagen Brazil, and the Vale do Rio Cristalino Farm: Explaining the Context**

In December 2014, the National Truth Commission (NTC)¹ published a detailed report on its activities, informing Brazilian society about the serious human rights violations and political murders committed during the military dictatorship (1964-1985). In this report, the NTC dedicated a chapter to civilians who collaborated with the dictatorship, demonstrating that the final arrangements for the coup involved the participation of foreign and domestic industrialists of varying sizes (Brazil 2014, 321). Among the various companies, the report pointed out that Volkswagen Brazil, at its factory in São Paulo in southeastern Brazil, actively collaborated with the regime's political police and persecuted company workers who were union activists.

In 2015, based on a complaint filed by the Workers' Forum for Truth, Justice, and Reparation, the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (FPP) and the São Paulo Public Prosecutor's Office (SPPP) launched investigations into Volkswagen Brazil's collaboration with the dictatorship. Subsequently, the Labor Public Prosecutor's Office (LPP) also began investigating the case. The investigations by the Brazilian Public Prosecutor's Office were compiled in the report "Human Rights, Companies, and Transitional Justice: The Role of Volkswagen Brazil in Political Repression during the Military Dictatorship", published in October 2020. The report showed how Volkswagen Brazil collaborated with the military government in repressing critics of the regime, assisting in the repression of political dissent and labor organization.

At the same time, Volkswagen's Integrity and Legal Department launched an investigation in 2016, resulting in the report "VW Brazil during the Brazilian military dictatorship 1964-85: a historical approach", prepared by researcher Christopher Kopper. The study analyzes the relationship between the management of Volkswagen Brazil and its German headquarters with the political leadership during the dictatorship, economic interests, colonialist ideology, and political stereotypes that were decisive in determining the company's attitude toward the regime, as well as the company's participation in political repression and its economic development during the period.

The studies concluded that the political and economic situation in Brazil during the dictatorship was highly favorable to Volkswagen Brazil's business, which benefited from various tax, exchange rate, and

¹ The National Truth Commission was created by Law No. 12,528/2011 and established on May 16, 2012. The Commission's purpose was to investigate serious human rights violations that occurred in Brazil between September 18, 1946, and October 5, 1988.

credit incentives, as well as the economic advantages of production costs resulting from the suspension of labor rights, wage control, and unions by the government, which reduced wages to a much lower level than in a pluralistic democracy with free wage bargaining and the right to strike (Brazil 2020). According to Christopher Kopper, a historian commissioned by Volkswagen:

The military coup of 1964 and the establishment of an increasingly repressive military dictatorship were viewed positively by the company, as it meant a more stable and business-friendly policy. Although the management of VW AG, as we can conclude from reliable German media coverage, was aware of the political and social repression during the military dictatorship, it accepted and downplayed this situation as inevitable from a colonialist point of view. (Kopper 2017, 130)

In addition to benefiting from the dictatorial policy, Volkswagen, “by decision of its senior management in Brazil and with the connivance of its headquarters in Germany” (Brazil 2020, 58), actively collaborated with the government’s political police through the company’s industrial security sector, “even though it was aware that this cooperation endangered the physical and moral integrity of these workers, including through the use of torture” (8). According to the report produced by the Brazilian Public Prosecutor’s Office: this cooperation included informing on and handing over employees to the police, contributing materially to illegal arrests, and collaborating in the forced disappearance, albeit temporary, of its workers by falsifying the truth about their arrest to their families (Brazil 2020).

This association between Volkswagen Brazil and the Brazilian dictatorial regime contributed to serious human rights violations committed during that period, which were recognized by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) as crimes against humanity. In the Gomes Lund (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2010) and Herzog (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2018) cases, the Court concluded that serious human rights violations occurred in a widespread and systematic context of attacks by the State against the civilian population, affecting men, women, children, adolescents, and the elderly from a wide range of social groups, such as urban workers, peasants, students, and clergy, through illegal and arbitrary detentions, torture, executions, forced disappearances, and the concealment of corpses by state agents.

The establishment of the regime of exception was accompanied by a political-economic project that involved not only the continuous growth of industry, but also the agricultural exploitation of the cerrado and tropical forests in northern Brazil, as a political action aimed at replacing the agrarian reform that had not yet been

carried out, thus guaranteeing the interests of the agrarian elites (Koopers 2017, 111) and the economic and political groups close to the dictatorial government. Therefore, the military government established a broader program of colonization of the Amazon, with an emphasis on the application of national and foreign capital based on state incentives. Historian Pere Petit divides this period into three phases:

The economic policy of the Federal Administration in the Legal Amazon, from the creation of Sudam until the end of the Military Regime (1985), can be divided into three different phases, although all of them were fueled by the idea of the Amazon as an empty territory to be occupied. The first was marked by a change in tax incentive policy [...] In the second phase, between 1970 and 1974, during the presidency of General Garrastazu Médici, priority was given to colonization projects in the Transamazon region, energy projects, and the expansion of the road network [...] In the third phase, beginning in the mid-1970s, the federal government, replacing the ECLAC model that inspired the practices of SPVEA and part of those developed in the early years of SUDAM, oriented its economic intervention based on the comparative advantages that the Amazon had in relation to other regions of the country, in order to contribute to national economic development [...] during Ernesto Geisel's term as president (1974-1979), the economic specialization to which the different intra-regional areas of the Brazilian Amazon would be assigned was clearly defined, giving priority to increasing land concentration and, above all, to investments aimed at creating the infrastructure required by mining and metallurgical projects, in addition to choosing the areas or municipalities of the Legal Amazon that would be of special interest to the Agricultural and Agromineral Hubs Program (Polamazônia). (Petit 2003, 81-2)

Joanoni Neto and Guimarães Neto (2019) explain that these investments, primarily directed at agricultural and mining projects, had economic, social, and cultural impacts that disrupted the lives of indigenous peoples, riverine communities, squatters, rubber tappers, artisanal fishermen, and quilombolas, in addition to causing environmental degradation, given the immense areas of land deforested for the projects.

These development plans for the Amazon, established by government policies in conjunction with industrial and financial capital, aimed at integrating the various regions of Brazil, which resulted not only in greater restrictions on rural workers' access to land, but also increased the expropriation of small landowners and

the removal of indigenous peoples and traditional communities from their territories (Joanoni Neto; Guimarães Neto 2019).

Among the various foreign companies that invested in the Amazon region, Volkswagen Brazil, at the time the leader in the Brazilian automobile market, through its subsidiary CVRC, acquired the Vale do Rio Cristalino Farm in Santana do Araguaia, Pará, with financing and tax incentives from Sudam and Banco da Amazônia. When acquiring the farm, Volkswagen's management believed that the legal incentives would be taken advantage of, that half of the land could be deforested and turned into pastures, with the promise of being a model farm geared towards international competition in a project that covered the entire beef production and marketing chain (Acker 2014, 17-18).

Acker (2014, 19) states that Sudam and Volkswagen conceived the farm as a hub for the development of technology and knowledge from industrialized countries, using ultra-modern technical standards and extreme scientific rigor to monitor the herd, supervised by renowned scientists from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (Switzerland) and the University of Georgia (USA).

In advertising documents from that time, Volkswagen publicized the social impact of the project and "frequently insisted that it had rescued these people from a precarious nomadic life marked by poverty" (Acker 2014, 19). At the Rio Cristalino Farm, the management of Volkswagen Brazil built a model colony in the center of the property for the 300 permanent employees, consisting of houses with electricity and water, community facilities such as a primary school for grades 1 to 4, a food cooperative, a community room with a stage, and a health clinic, with continuous monitoring of workers, especially the control of alcoholic beverages, in a model of authoritarian paternalism typical of the company at the time.

For VW, the school was an important contribution to the process of "keeping people on the farm, where they receive a good salary, modern and functional accommodation, and an excellent social structure." Employees lived in small individual or family houses equipped with electricity and running water. They had schedules and leisure spaces—a soccer field, a bar, a dance hall, movie theaters, and swimming pools, among other amenities—as well as free medical and dental services. VW publications emphasized that all these social principles had been imported from the social welfare policy already in place at its German factories. (Acker 2014, 19-20)



Figures 1-2 Images taken by the parliamentary delegation that visited the Volkswagen Farm in 1983 show the wooden houses of permanent workers and evidence of deforestation in the area. Source: Personal archives of Expedito Soares and Ricardo Rezende Figueira

The farm then became a model for the military government's propaganda campaign promoting its project to "modernize" the Amazon region through capital-intensive agribusiness and land concentration as the only efficient way to occupy the Amazon. However, the accelerated exploitation of natural resources with the transformation of the forest into pasture, considered a sign of progress and touted by Volkswagen in the press, became the most emblematic case of environmental degradation of the period, dubbed by various groups as the "most anti-ecological project in the world" (Acker 2014, 21-2).

Five months later, a NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) satellite detected a continuous fire in the southeastern Amazon in an area of approximately 25,000 km², located at the intersection of several cattle farms. VW had not burned the entire area out—only 9,383 hectares were located on the German company's property. But rumors about the satellite photo spread among the Amazon research community.

The fire at the Volkswagen Farm was debated in the Brazilian public sphere and internationally, reported by various foreign media outlets, and discussed in the German and European parliaments. Associated with the environmental controversy, allegations arose that migrant workers who had informal employment relationships with the Volkswagen Farm had a completely different reality from that experienced by workers with permanent contracts. Hired by intermediaries, these workers became victims of contemporary slave labor and human trafficking, suffering threats, violence, armed surveillance, debt bondage, exhausting working hours, and degrading working conditions.

3 Contemporary Slave Labor and Human Trafficking at the Vale do Rio Cristalino Farm

The investigations conducted within the scope of the legal proceedings proved the existence of slave labor and human trafficking at the Vale do Rio Cristalino farm between 1974 and 1986. The case was built on a range of evidence, such as a dossier from the Pastoral Land Commission (PLC), testimony from victims, family members, and witnesses, newspaper articles and parliamentary debates, reports from visits and interviews with CVRC directors, police investigations, the results of an on-site inspection by a commission composed of parliamentarians, journalists, union representatives, and a religious leader, and testimony collected by the LPP itself.

According to the aforementioned information, there were approximately 300 direct employees at the Volkswagen Farm. However, the services of clearing the forest and forming pasture were performed by workers recruited by contractors, known as “gatos” (cats), without formal employment contracts. Reports even pointed to the sale of workers between contractors. The “gatos” recruited workers from impoverished villages in various states of the country - particularly Goiás, Mato Grosso, Tocantins, and Pará - with the promise of good wages and decent conditions. In the light of these circumstances, the Labor Court concluded that the recruitment of rural workers to provide services in remote locations constituted human trafficking (Brazil 2025, 90).

The workers were then transported in open trucks under armed guard. Upon arriving at the farm, they found working conditions that were completely different from what had been promised at the time of hiring. The workers were subjected to continuous surveillance and control, with armed security guards, searches, and a ban on carrying alcoholic beverages. Moreover, they were denied access to the headquarters’ infrastructure - such as the school, health care, and leisure facilities - which were restricted to directors and direct employees.

During a parliamentary delegation visit in 1983 to investigate allegations of modern slavery, a worker was caught by the contractor, who was taking the man back to work at the farm in chains.



Figure 3 On the farm road, the parliamentary delegation found a worker was caught by the contractor, who was taking the man back to work at the farm in chains. Source: Personal archives of Expedito Soares and Ricardo Rezende Figueira

Working conditions on the farm met the criteria for the multiple forms of contemporary slave labor provided for in Brazilian law: debt bondage, exhausting working hours, degrading working conditions, and restriction of freedom and use of violence. Debt bondage occurred on the work fronts, 80 km away from the farm headquarters, where workers were forced to buy products at canteens controlled by contractors, at abusive prices. Debts included transportation, tarps to cover shacks, food, tools, and medicine. In the end, workers were told that there was nothing to pay; it was the “truck system”.

The exhausting workdays and degrading conditions were characterized by uninterrupted work, including weekends and holidays, without proper food or rest. In addition, the housing provided to workers was in precarious shacks without bathrooms. The workers consumed unsafe water and were exposed to venomous animals and malaria, a disease endemic to the Amazon region. They did not receive personal protective equipment, and they would not receive medical assistance in the event of serious accidents. Furthermore, any medicines provided were debited from a ledger.

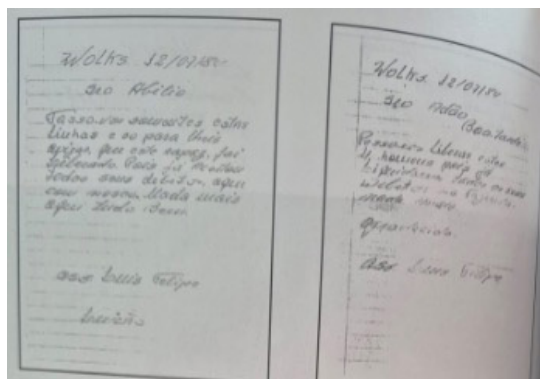


Figure 4 Authorization for the worker to leave the farm. Source: Archive of the Contemporary Slave Labor Research Group (GPTEC)

Indebted workers were not able to leave the farm without permission from the “cats”, finding themselves under constant surveillance, subject to acts of violence, and with restrictions on their freedom. According to testimonies, escape attempts resulted in persecution, beatings, tying up, armed threats, and even homicides, with disappearances and the concealment of bodies in rivers and caves in the region. It is noteworthy that contractors preferred young people, even 17-year-olds, due to their greater capacity for the very physically demanding work of tree felling. There were cases, such as the one reported below, where the person recruited was elderly, though.

Servino Barreira de Almeida, 75, retired, born in Balsas, Maranhão, resident of Paraíso do Norte, claims to have been hired on April 4, 1984, by Mr. Joaquim Gringo to work on Volkswagen’s Vale do Rio Cristalino farm in the municipality of Redenção, Pará. The agreement was for payment of Cr\$120,000.00 for grazing land rental, with road expenses paid by the cattle owner. Upon arriving in Barreira de Campos, Joaquim Gringo handed him over to Mr. Ábílio, who altered the agreement, reducing the payment to Cr\$40,000.00 and requiring to cover transportation expenses be paid by the workers. The group had more than twenty workers. He states that during his time working there, he became ill with a wound on his forehead that became infected and bled, without receiving medical treatment. He reports that in the tent there were two gunmen armed with revolvers and 12-gauge shotguns, as well as a hanging “chilena” (a type of knife), used to threaten the workers. He reports that he worked for 4 months and 21 days and received only Cr\$100,000.00, with a balance of only Cr\$10,000.00 remaining on the day he left. He went two days without eating on

the farm, in degrading conditions (thorns, mud, water up to his knees). (Brazil 2025, 147)

The account of Servino Barreira de Almeida, an elderly worker, illustrates the various pieces of evidence gathered in the court case, demonstrating the slave-like working conditions of those who worked at the Volkswagen Farm, highlighting fraudulent recruitment, harmful contract alterations, non-payment of full wages, degrading conditions, and the presence of armed guards for surveillance and coercion.

Contemporary slave labor conditions are rooted in the vulnerabilities of the individual, and in Brazil, these workers are caught up in a system of structural inequality and discrimination within society. In the case of *Workers of Fazenda Brasil Verde v. Brazil*, ruled on October 20, 2016, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights analyzed the phenomenon of slave labor in Brazil within the context of the country's historical structural discrimination, which has systematically allowed and continues to allow the violent exploitation of human beings. Slave labor exploits the workforce, reducing workers to mere disposable commodities, thus violating their dignity (Miraglia 2020, 129).

According to the Inter-American Court (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2016, 87), individuals in vulnerable situations are entitled to special heightened protection, due to the special duties imposed on the State to satisfy its general obligations to respect and guarantee human rights. The Brazilian State must therefore take all necessary measures with due diligence to prevent and eradicate slave labor. In this case, the accountability of those agents who committed this violation stems from these State duties of guarantee, which arise from international commitments.

4 The Legal Process: The Non-Applicability of Statutes of Limitations to Contemporary Slavery and the Responsibility of Volkswagen Brazil

In civil lawsuit No. 0001135-97.2024.5.08.0118, the Public Ministry of Labor sought to convict Volkswagen Brazil for its responsibility for practices that constitute slave labor and human trafficking, as well as widespread disregard for occupational health and safety standards between 1974 and 1986 at the Vale do Rio Cristalino Farm.

In its defense, the company argued that it would not be possible to retroactively apply current concepts and parameters to judge conduct that allegedly occurred between 1970 and 1986, even before the 1988 Constitution of the Republic came into force. Therefore, any assessment of the facts should consider the normative and cultural context of the time under penalty of violating the principle of legal

certainty. On this basis, the events that occurred would not constitute slave labor and human trafficking, but only possible violations of labor rights that would be time-barred under national law. However, this argument was not accepted by the Labor Court. According to the ruling, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was already an international obligation to prohibit and repress slavery in all its forms, as Brazil was bound by domestic and international norms that forbade slavery and demanded respect for the minimum dignity of workers (Brazil 2025, 138).

The prohibition of slavery and its analogous forms constitutes a peremptory norm of international law – *jus cogens* – which cannot be derogated from or modified by a subsequent norm, pursuant to Article 53 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties. The rejection of slavery is one of the earliest and most robust consequences in international society, and was expressed in the first historic milestone in the process of internationalizing human rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Several international normative instruments which had been ratified by Brazil were in force at the time of the events, such as the 1926 Slavery Convention, the Supplementary Convention on Slavery of 1956, and Conventions No. 29 and 105 on Forced Labor of the International Labor Organization, all to prevent, investigate, punish, and redress human rights violations that constitute slavery and its analogous forms. In addition, the country also ratified the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which establishes in Article 7 that no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

In recognizing the imprescriptibility of slave-like labor, the ruling concluded that imprescriptibility derives from the 1988 Constitution of the Republic, which prohibits slavery and enshrines human dignity as a foundation of the Republic; from international human rights law, which treats slavery as an irrevocable norm of *jus cogens*, and from the consolidated jurisprudence of the Superior Court of Justice (SCJ) and the Superior Labor Court (SLC), which extend the non-applicability of statutes of limitations to civil and collective redress actions in cases of serious human rights violations.

The Labor Court ruling affirmed the duty of the national judiciary to monitor conventionality² by harmonizing domestic legislation with international human rights treaties ratified by Brazil. In this regard, it is considered that the decisions of the Inter-American Court are

2 According to André de Carvalho Ramos, within the domestic jurisdiction, the control of national conventionality in the field of human rights consists of analyzing the compatibility between laws (and normative acts) and international human rights treaties, carried out by Brazilian judges and courts when ruling on specific cases.

binding, not only in their operative part, but also in their reasoning (ratio decidendi). On this basis, the court applied the understanding of the Inter-American Court in the judgment of the case of Workers of Fazenda Brasil Verde v. Brazil.

In this ruling, Brazil was convicted of violating the right not to be subjected to slavery and human trafficking, as provided for in Article 6.1 of the American Convention on Human Rights (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2016). The Court established that contemporary slave labor constitutes a serious violation of human rights and is therefore not subject to a statute of limitations, because recognizing the statute of limitations would mean preventing investigation, accountability, and redress for victims.

The Inter-American Court affirmed that States have an obligation to guarantee the creation of the necessary conditions to prevent violations of the inalienable right not to be enslaved and, in particular, the duty to prevent their agents and private third parties from violating it. Regarding the state's obligation to guarantee this right, it was considered that this implies the state's duty to prevent and investigate, with the adoption of comprehensive measures to comply with due diligence in cases of contemporary slavery, with an adequate legal framework for protection and its effective application, as well as prevention policies and practices that allow for effective action in response to complaints (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2016, 83).

In this regard, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found that the crime of slavery and its analogous forms are not subject to statutes of limitations under international law due to their nature as crimes under international law, whose prohibition has attained the status of jus cogens. According to the Court's jurisprudence, crimes constituting serious human rights violations cannot be subject to statutes of limitations. Thus, the "Court's decision obviously has the effect of declaring that slavery and its analogous forms are imprescriptible, regardless of whether they correspond to one or more criminal offenses under Brazilian domestic law" (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2016, 112).

With respect to Volkswagen Brazil's responsibility, the lawsuit gathered evidence detailing the Farm command and oversight structure, with emphasis on the command and oversight exercised by the Company, the continuous control of the export profit chain, and the international technical cooperation involved in the Farm's activities:

Command and supervision: Volkswagen's standardized safety protocols, uniforms, surveillance, and repression, and inspectors/managers who met, decided, and checked services — typical elements of activity management and operational interference,

useful for recognizing economic groups by coordination (Art. 2, §2, CLT) and removing the neutrality of contract agreements (primacy of reality);

Profit chain: exports of wood and meat, technical cooperation with German institutions, integration with meatpacking plants, and destination of production to Europe –demonstrating economic benefit and nexus of imputation (beneficiary taker). (Brazil 2025, 153)

Recognizing Volkswagen Brazil’s responsibility, labor judge Otávio Bruno da Silva Ferreira ordered the company to pay R\$ 165,000,000.00 in compensation for collective moral damages, which will be transferred to the State Fund for the Promotion of Decent Work and the Eradication of Slave-like Working Conditions in Pará (FUNTRAD/PA). In addition to the compensation, the company must comply with a series of remedial and preventive measures, such as a public apology to society and the affected workers; the dissemination of an official statement on social media, the company’s website, newspapers, radio, and television; the creation of an accessible reporting channel protected against retaliation; the implementation of independent audits and human rights policies with a “zero tolerance” clause for slave labor; mandatory training for managers and operational teams; and the annual publication of human rights reports for three years.

The case is currently under appeal before the TRT-8th Region, and its outcome will constitute an important chapter in Brazil’s history of combating contemporary slave labor. By affirming the imprescriptibility of this serious human rights violation and reinforcing companies’ commitment to the protection of human rights, the Brazilian Judiciary contributes to the consolidation of substantive democracy in the country and the continuation of transitional justice.

5 Final Considerations

The conviction of Volkswagen Brazil for contemporary slave labor and human trafficking at the Vale do Rio Cristalino farm contributes to an understanding of the dynamics of structural inequality in Brazilian society by highlighting the complex relationship between foreign capital and the military dictatorship in the exploitation of the Amazon and its workers. The investigation showed that Volkswagen’s significant economic prosperity in Brazil was based on a state economic policy that favored land and income concentration within a context of suppression of labor rights and political persecution of dissidents of the regime.

In this context, the Volkswagen Farm, internationally promoted as a model project of development and modernization, was in fact a site of environmental degradation and serious human rights violations, with migrant workers subjected to contemporary slavery and human trafficking.

The Labor Court's decision, which recognized Volkswagen Brazil's responsibility and declared these serious violations imprescriptible, based on the Fazenda Brasil Verde case of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, reiterates the Brazilian State's duty to prevent, investigate, punish, and remedy slave labor. The conviction for collective moral damages and the imposition of reparatory and preventive measures strengthen the need for companies to make an unequivocal commitment to due diligence in human rights. On November 17, 2025, some surviving victims of the case filed individual labor lawsuits before the Labor Court in Redenção. Their lawyers are seeking one million reais for each worker and have requested priority processing. Due to the company's resistance to acknowledging the crime or reaching an amicable agreement, the case may still be prolonged; in the meantime, additional victims of the company may not be able to receive compensation during their lifetime.

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