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Banana dispute feeds fear, anger toward U.S.

by Dan Perry
The Associated Press

CASTRIES, St. Lucia - It's the start of the rainy season in the mountainous, fertile island of St. Lucia - a time when Ellis Rupert Gajadhar and fellow banana farmers should be happily looking forward to peak harvesting and profit.

But it's a season of uncertainty now on Caribbean islands heavily dependent on their bananas - and a time of deep bitterness toward the United States, which won a key battle last week in its war against trade preferences that keep Europe buying the yellow fruit.

For America, the issue is U.S. firms' stake in the global economy. For Europe, it's partly a moral debt to people they enslaved. And for islanders, it's a humbling quest for a place in the sun.

On a farm just south of Castries, Gajadhar's eyes sparkle as he speaks of bananas. "Bananas are my life, and bananas are the region's lifeblood," says the owner of 16 acres.

Gajadhar, 52, believes Caribbean bananas are the best - "a sweeter, better-tasting fruit" than those grown by U.S. giants such as Chiquita Brands and Dole Food in Latin America.

The problems

But he admits some problems. Substandard storage and transport make quality inconsistent. Absence of irrigation suppresses yield much of the year. And hurricanes make supply forecasts unreliable.

Bananas were introduced by British colonizers and developed after independence because they grow year-round and boast the high yield-to-land ratio important to tiny territories.

Bananas - and, more recently, tourism - are credited for somewhat improved living standards. But the per-capita income on many islands remains low - about \$3,000 a year in St. Lucia - and their economies are dangerously dependent on one crop.

In the Windward Islands, the southern half of the eastern Caribbean chain, about a third of the labor force works in bananas, providing 35 percent of export earnings. Bananas are also key to larger Caribbean countries, such as Jamaica.

The vast majority of the region's crop - a mere 1 percent of the world's production - goes to Europe. There, it has long been protected and now accounts for almost a tenth of the EU's banana imports.

A scheme established in 1993 gives preference in licensing to those who import bananas from former colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and the Pacific, and imposes tariffs on bananas from elsewhere.

This is seen by many in the Caribbean as an obligation to former colonies populated by descendants of Africans the Europeans enslaved.

In what's being called the "banana war," American officials have charged that the preferences are unfair to U.S. companies that grow bananas in Central America, cost consumers billions, and are illegal and inefficient.

"It's an ideal world (the Caribbean) had over many years, and everybody would want to live in that kind of thing," said D. Brent Hardt, chief of the political and economic section at the U.S. Embassy in Barbados. "But it has stymied growth in what had been a rapidly growing market."

Hardt insisted the United States was not opposed to the idea of preferences but to the way they are implemented, and that there are ways to "both provide protection and meet (World Trade Organization) rules."

Such fine points seem lost in the Caribbean.

What happened

The WTO decision Tuesday to support the U.S. claims and authorize \$191 million of punitive U.S. tariffs on EU goods sparked gloom and fears of imminent European capitulation.

"If anything or anyone has to be sacrificed as a result of this ruling, the banana producing islands . . . in the Caribbean will," The Voice newspaper said in an editorial. The ruling "ought to send shivers down the spine of banana growers."

People on the street heartily agreed.

"Everyone is cursing the United States," said Moses Eugene, 32. "We need the banana money. When someone from down the street wants to buy your stuff and your neighbor interferes, it's not right."

For many, it confirms that the United States has lost interest in the region because of its diminished strategic value in the post-Cold War world. U.S. aid levels to the English-speaking Caribbean are at a fraction of the former \$200 million a year, they note.

"These are friendly little countries to the U.S., and that the U.S. would want to jeopardize their economic backbone is unbelievable!" said Bernard Cornibert, head of Windward Islands Banana Development and Exporting.

"If we do not have a regime that maintains access for our bananas in the EU, our banana industry would collapse," he said. "That means increasing unemployment, falling income and all the social and political problems."

The drug question

He said some growers might turn to marijuana, or help the northbound transit of South American drugs. "We're being pushed to retaliate in this kind of disgusting manner."

At a summit in Suriname last month, leaders angered by the U.S. challenge discussed suspending a 1997 treaty for Caribbean nations to cooperate in the U.S. war on drugs.

Gajadhar is trying to come up with more constructive ideas.

When his father started growing bananas, he remembers, "they would walk 3 miles to Castries with bunches on their heads." He has since seen the advent of truck delivery, protective foam packing for the bushels and fungicides.

What the industry needs now is reliability - and that means finding the money for expensive containers to protect bananas on their voyage to Europe, and for irrigation to eliminate overdependence on the April-to-October rainy season.

"The farmers have the ability to adjust because of the fact that there is no alternative to bananas here. We're going to produce bananas!" he

said. "It's a question of survival."

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