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Trial on Exploitation of Vineyard Workers in Champagne Region Delayed to June 2024

Case involves allegations of human trafficking, illegal employment, and inhumane conditions during the 2023 grape harvest season.

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A trial concerning the exploitation of vineyard workers in the Champagne region has been postponed to June 19, 2024. Initially scheduled for this week in Châlons-en-Champagne, the delay was granted at the request of the defense, according to Maxime Cessieux, the victims' lawyer. The case involves allegations of human trafficking, illegal employment, and inhumane living conditions during the 2023 grape harvest.

The head of Anavim, a company providing vineyard labor services, faces charges including human trafficking, concealed work, employing undocumented workers, and subjecting vulnerable individuals to degrading housing conditions. Two other individuals accused of recruiting workers, as well as Anavim and a Champagne vineyard company, are also implicated.

The 57 workers, mostly from Mali, Mauritania, Côte d’Ivoire, and Senegal, were reportedly recruited in the Paris region through word-of-mouth. They were promised daily wages of 80 euros, according to Cessieux. Transported to the Champagne vineyards by a chartered bus, they were later forced to live in what the lawyer described as "horrific conditions." The workers lacked sufficient food and water, and their accommodations in Nesle-le-Repons were described as squalid. Mattresses were placed directly on dirt floors, and makeshift plastic sheets or deflated air mattresses served as shower doors, according to José Blanco, a union representative from CGT-Champagne.

The situation came to light after local residents alerted authorities. A labor inspection conducted on September 15, 2023, confirmed the dire conditions. Following the inspection, the workers were relocated, but most were reportedly never paid for their labor, said Michel Miné, a lawyer representing the Human Rights League, which is also a civil party in the case.

The 2023 harvest season in Champagne was marked by several incidents, including the deaths of four workers during an unusually hot September. These events, dubbed the "harvest of shame" by media outlets, have drawn significant criticism. The Champagne industry, keen to protect its reputation, has taken steps to address the issue. For the first time, the Comité Champagne, representing thousands of winemakers and cooperatives, has joined the case as a civil party. Its director, Charles Goemaere, stated that the organization strongly opposes such practices.

The Champagne sector relies heavily on seasonal labor, with half of the workforce recruited annually through service providers. The trial is expected to shed light on the working conditions in the industry and the responsibilities of those involved.