Behind Roses' Beauty, Poor and Ill Workers

By GINGER THOMPSON

AYAMBE, Ecuador, Feb. 10 — In just five years, Ecuadorean roses, as big and red as the human heart, have become the new status flower in the United States, thanks to the volcanic soil, perfect temperatures and abundant sunlight that help generate $240 million a year and tens of thousands of jobs in this once-impoverished region north of Quito.

This St. Valentine's Day, hundreds of American florists and catalogs are offering the roses of this fertile valley. Calyx & Corolla, for instance, bills it as a place "where Andean mists and equatorial sun conspire to produce roses that quickly burst into extravagant bloom, then hold their glory long after lesser specimens have begun to droop."

But roses come with thorns, too. As Ecuador's colorful blooms radiate romance around the world, large growers here have been accused of misusing a toxic mixture of pesticides, fungicides and fumigants to grow and export unblemished pest-free flowers.

As in other industries like garment production, bananas and diamonds, the poor worry about eating first and labor conditions later. They toil here despite headaches and rashes here for the wealthier of the world, who in turn know little of the conditions in which their desires are met.

Doctors and scientists who have worked here say serious health problems have resulted for many of the industry's 50,000 workers, more than 70 percent of them women. Researchers say their work is hampered by lack of access to flower farms because of reluctant growers. But studies that the International Labor Organization published in 1999 and the Catholic University issued here last year showed that women in the industry had more miscarriages than average and that more than 60 percent of all workers suffered headaches, nausea, blurred vision or fatigue.

"No one can speak with conclusive facts in hand about the impact of this industry on the health of the workers, because we have not been able to do the necessary studies," said Dr. Bolivar Vera, a health specialist at the Health Environment and Development Foundation in Quito. "So the companies have been able to wash their hands of the matter."

In the 20 years since the farms started here, Ecuador has out of nowhere become the fourth-largest producer of roses in the world, with customers from Kazakhstan to Kansas.

St. Valentine's Day is the biggest rose event in the United States, which buys more than 70 percent of its cut flowers from South America and is Ecuador's biggest trading partner. Roses retail for up to $6 a bloom. Last week, workers at RosaPrima, a plantation here, moved at a dizzying pace to cut, wrap and box 70,000 stems a day. Computers help supervisors track each stem and each worker's productivity.

The general manager, Ross Johnson, said he was proud of his business and especially his workers. He
said that a doctor visited the farm several times a week and that all workers wore gloves and protective equipment, whether or not handling chemicals. Mr. Johnson said he had cracked down on contractors who hired children as temporary workers.

"We have made a lot of improvements over the years," said Mr. Johnson, who was born in Ecuador and who helped start the farm seven years ago. "I think this is a noble business that does noble things for people here and around the world."

He said roses were typically fumigated 24 hours before being cut. Then they are soaked overnight in a nontoxic chemical solution and shipped at near freezing temperatures.

Dr. César Paz-y-Miño, a geneticist at the Catholic University, said several pesticides used on a farm that was the setting for his research in the late 1990's were restricted as health hazards in other countries, including the United States, and labeled as highly toxic by the World Health Organization.

Among the most notorious are captan, aldicarb and fenamiphos. Dr. Paz-y-Miño refused to identify the flower farm under an agreement that he said he had with the owners.

He described the conditions as astonishing and recalled workers' fumigating in street clothes without protective equipment, pesticides stored in poorly sealed containers and fumes wafting over the workers' dining halls. When asked what government agencies monitor worker health and safety, Dr. Paz-y-Miño said, "There are no such checks."

Neither the Labor nor Health Ministries have occupational health departments. In an interview, Labor Minister Felipe Mantilla said he planned to visit flower and banana plantations in a few weeks. Human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, have criticized Ecuadorian banana growers for using child labor. Mr. Mantilla said the government planned to set up "discussion tables" for workers and managers to discuss competitiveness and labor conditions.

"If there are violations," he said, "we will act firmly. We are drawing up a plan of action on the issue of workers' conditions and we are seeking help from international organizations. The ministry does not have funds to implement plans for progressive control. So that is why we look for international help."

Industry representatives denied that there was a health problem or that unacceptable risks were taken.

"The growers we know are very conscious of environmental issues," said Harrison Kennicott, the chief executive of Kennicott Brothers, a wholesaler in Chicago who is a former president of the Society of American Florists, a trade group.

"They go to lengths to get certified environmentally," Mr. Kennicott said. "The growers take care of the people. They provide housing and medical care.

"Our job is to satisfy our customers, who are the florists and retailers who deliver flowers to the public. Our interest is having the best quality product at a competitive price."

Yet it is hard to erase images of workers like Soledad, 32, and Petrona, 34, both mothers and both looking jaundiced and bony. In interviews after quitting time, they asked not to be fully identified out of fear that they would lose their $156-a-month jobs cutting flowers in greenhouses. The women said they had elementary school educations but did not need high-level science to tell them why their kidneys throbbed at night and heads throbbed in the day.
"There is no respect for the fumigation rules," said Petrona, who has worked on flower farms for four years. "They spray the chemicals even while we are working."

"My hair has begun to fall out," she added, running a hand from the top of her visibly receding hairline down a single scruffy braid. "I am young, but I feel very old."

Soledad, who has worked on flower farms for 12 years, slowly turned her head from side to side. "If I move my head any faster, I feel nauseous," she said, and then pulled up her sleeve to show her skeletal limbs. "I have no appetite."

When asked whether the farm where they worked had a doctor on duty, the women rolled their eyes. "He always tells us there is nothing wrong with us and sends us back to work," Petrona said. "He works for the company. He does not help us."

The industry received a helping hand from the Andean Trade Preference Act of 1991. It gives tariff-free access to American markets for farmers in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. The law was intended as part of Washington's fight against drug trafficking, offering incentives to abandon coca and poppy growing.

Roses have become one of the top five sources of export revenue for Ecuador. The bloom boom has transformed this once sleepy region of cattle ranches, inhabited primarily by Indians. Much of the heartland has been hollowed out by illegal immigration to Europe and the United States, but the population in the flower regions north and south of Quito has soared. In Cayambe, the population has increased in 10 years, from 5,000 to more than 70,000.

Flowers have helped pave roads and built sophisticated irrigation systems. This year, construction will begin on an international airport between Quito and Cayambe.

The average flower worker earns more than the $120-a-month minimum wage. By employing women, the industry has fostered a social revolution in which mothers and wives have more control over their families' spending, especially on schooling for their children.

As it has grown successful, the industry has come under fire from the green movement in Europe and was the subject of a recent article in Mother Jones magazine. European consumers have pressed for improvements and environmental safeguards, encouraging some growers to join a voluntary program aimed at helping customers identify responsible growers. The certification signifies that dozens of the 460 growers have distributed protective gear, given training in using chemicals and hired doctors to visit at least weekly.

"There are still farms that do not respect fumigation limits or give workers proper training and equipment for handling chemicals," said Gonzalo Luzuriaga, chief executive officer of BellaRosa, another flower grower here. "But many of the farmers are very conscientious about these issues, and we are working to make improvements."

Still numerous signs remain that life for the workers, although better, is far from good. Looking over the town plaza from his second-floor office, Mayor Diego Bonifaz, who also operates a flower farm, said: "It's hard for me to get the wealth out of the plantations and into the community. The farms operate in the first world, selling flowers on the Internet. I am still struggling to pave streets."

Reliable health care, however, seems the most glaring need. Beds have been added to the local hospital, doctors said, but workers often cannot afford services there. The chief of the Red Cross clinic, Dr. Toribio Valladares, said he had seen growing numbers of people with respiratory problems, conjunctivitis, miscarriages and rashes, although he did not have firm numbers.

Like the two women who harvest greenhouse roses, Dr. Valladares voiced deep distrust of doctors who worked on the flower farms.

"When the workers go for help to the doctors on the plantations," he said, "the doctors treat the symptoms but do not examine the workers to try to determine their illnesses. And the doctors always tell them that their illnesses have nothing to do with their work."

In Miami, James Pagano, chief marketing officer of Calyx & Corolla, said he had not been to Ecuador and did not want to comment on environmental or worker conditions.

"We buy what we think consumers will perceive to be a high quality rose at a competitive price," he said. The environment "is not an issue we have any business being in."