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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

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Cambodia: murderers of prominent trade union leaders enjoy impunity, says ICFTU

Brussels, 27th October 2004 (ICFTU Online): The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) today charged Cambodia's government with being "at best unable, and at worst unwilling" to carry out a proper investigation into the murders of two prominent trade union leaders that have occurred this year. The charges came in a 14-page complaint it lodged today with the Committee on Freedom of Association of the UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Chea Vichea, President of the Free Trade Union of the Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTUWKC) and Ros Sovannareth, President of the Trinonga Komara Garment Union and a Steering Committee member of the FTUWKC were killed in broad daylight on 22 January 2004 and 7 May 2004 respectively. Both murders were contract killings.

So far the investigations into their murders raise more questions than answers and have been heavily criticised by several independent observers, the ICFTU said. Witnesses have been threatened and key eye-witnesses to the crimes have disappeared, without giving testimony to the police. Furthermore, the judicial process has been biased. Allegations of forced confessions and alibis have been totally disregarded by the courts.

Conspicuously, there has been no investigation into who solicited the killings. In the Chea Vichea murder case, the investigating judge was removed from office after he dropped charges, for lack of evidence, against the two suspects arrested by the police. The many shortcomings of the investigation and the lack of proper judicial process raise serious doubts as to whether the government wants the real perpetrators to be brought to justice.

The two murders are an example of just how dangerous it is to exercise trade union activities in Cambodia. Another example is the assault, on 23 June, on Lay Sophead, the female President of a union affiliated with the FTUWKC, who was left for dead. Furthermore the police reportedly used water hoses against 1,700 striking workers in Sihanoukville in October 2004. Police also interfere in trade union activities, says the ICFTU. On 18 August 2004, about 40 police officers tried to stop a trade union seminar for 60 people in the Bakan district of the Pursat province. They managed to scare off 30 people. The others had to move into a private house for a two-hour meeting.

In view of the recent wave of police interference, physical assaults and murders, the ICFTU suspects that incentives for the Cambodian government to respect international labour standards have decreased owing to the phasing out of the WTO Agreement on Textiles and Clothing, which expires at the end of 2004. The end of the quota system is widely seen as putting the industry's profits at risk and consequently its very existence. Docile trade unions would clearly make the lives of factory owners and the government's easier. The increase in harassment and targeting of trade unionists may therefore not be coincidental. On the contrary there would appear to be a concerted attack against trade unionists, carried out in a climate of total impunity.

In its complaint to the ILO (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991220667&Language=EN>), the ICFTU submits extensive details on the murder investigations and information on the many threats and attacks on other trade unionists. The ICFTU represents 148 million workers through its 234 affiliated national trade union centres in 152 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

For more information, please contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2 224 0232 or +32 476 621 018.