

>>> press@icftu.org 11/05 16:27 >>>

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

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174/051104

Colombian government explanation for expulsion of trade unionists "not credible"

Brussels, 5th November 2004 (ICFTU Online): The deportation from Colombia's "Eldorado" airport in Bogotá last weekend of four senior international trade unionists marks an escalation of the government's anti-union policies, Colombia's Ambassador to Brussels Mr. Nicolás Echavarría was told by a seven-strong Global Unions delegation (*) this morning. The four unionists, due to attend an international coordination meeting in Bogotá, were told by senior immigration officials that their names appeared on a "list of people denied entry to Colombia" because they had attended an international union conference last September later described as "illegal" by senior government officials.

The four included Victor Baez Mosqueira, General Secretary of the ICFTU's Inter-American Regional Organisation (ICFTU-ORIT), who refused to sign a declaration alleging that he had "attempted to enter the country without a proper visa". As a citizen of Paraguay, Baez does not need a visa to enter Colombia. Another delegate, Cameron Duncan, Regional Secretary of Public Services International (PSI), was detained at the airport office of the DAS security agency from 11:30pm on 31 October until 7am the following morning, when he was placed on a US-bound aircraft. The other two delegates, Antonio Rodriguez Fritz and Rodolfo Benitez, Regional Secretaries of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and of Union Network International (UNI), respectively, had been deported in similar circumstances.

Colombia's Vice President Francisco Santos and Foreign Minister Carolina Barco have since apologised for the deportation, arguing it was a "mistake by immigration officials", resulting from an "erroneous interpretation of Decree 2173". The apology came after trade union groups from around the world issued strong protests at the expulsions, including most recently 13 national union centers from the Andean region Trade Union Council (Consejo Laboral Andino). Decree 2173 had been adopted in 2001 by the previous administration (under President Samper), following massive international participation in a national protest march by rural workers in the beginning of that year.

This morning, the Global Unions delegation told the Ambassador these explanations "could not be accepted" by the international union movement. It strongly denied that the four had "refused to apply for regular entry visas", saying they had never been given that choice. It also rejected the Ambassador's claim that "no such list existed", stressing that while other international trade union delegates attending a different meeting this week in Bogotá had been admitted into the country, their entrance visas had been reduced in length after they informed immigration authorities of the trade union nature of their visit.

The delegation also expressed its concern that the Colombian Government's list may fall into the hands of extremist paramilitaries, who are responsible for the deaths of more than 50 Colombian trade unionists already this year.

Commenting after the meeting at Colombia's Brussels Embassy this morning, ICFTU Assistant General Secretary Jose Olivio de Oliveira, who led the delegation, said Global Unions would now "carefully study the government's response, as well as the ILO's views on the matter". The ICFTU earlier this week reported the incident to the Committee on Freedom of Association of the UN's International Labour Office, which is tomorrow holding an exceptional "special meeting" to examine the situation of trade union rights in Colombia. "This is no accident or mistake. The government's explanations are simply not credible and we are determined to respond to this hostile development with all available means", he added.

* The other members of this morning delegation to the Embassy were senior leaders and representatives of the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM), Education International (EI), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF).

The ICFTU represents 148 million workers in 234 affiliated organisations in 152 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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