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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

ICFTU OnLine...

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Burma: Fresh ICFTU evidence of forced labour ahead of crucial ILO meeting

Brussels, 12th November 2004 (ICFTU OnLine): As the Governing Body of the International Labour Office (ILO) prepares to discuss the Burma situation next week, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has released new evidence of forced labour taking place in various parts of the country. For the fourth time since last June, the ICFTU has provided concrete examples of forced labour of various types, including road construction, military camps building and maintenance, carrying of army supplies and ammunition, agricultural work and many others. In its 4-page letter to the ILO, the ICFTU provides dozens of examples from Karen, Arakan and Chin States, as well as from the Pegu, Tennasserim and Sagaing Divisions. Some of the forced labour took place as recently as mid-October 2004.

The ICFTU information is based on data collected by the Federation of Trade Unions - Burma (FTUB), an underground workers' organisation active inside Burmese territory and maintaining office and training structures in neighbouring countries. Three FTUB leaders and activists were sentenced to death one year ago, after the authorities discovered they were supplying information about forced labour to the ILO. Although their sentences have since been reduced to prison terms, they remain in detention to-date. Their cases will feature prominently in next week's ILO discussions.

Several Burmese army commanders are identified by name in the new ICFTU report (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991220741&Language=EN>). In Tenasserim Division, one Colonel Soe Thet, of the 4th Centre of Strategic Command, is reported to have ordered nearly 300 people from ten different villages to work on the construction of a paved road. The road building contract had been awarded to a Thai construction firm; the ICFTU is presently investigating the matter in cooperation with the Geneva-based International Federation of Building and Wood Workers (IFBWW).

At least 12 army officers commanding Infantry Battalions deployed in six different states are mentioned by name in the report. They include Commander Win Oo, of Infantry Battalion n° 39, who last May detained four women and their children in the Bawgali area (Pegu Division, in Central Burma) when his soldiers failed to find villagers to carry loads for his unit. They were brought to a local police station and released only the following day, after nine male villagers came out of hiding; the men were then ordered to carry heavy equipment to Koh Day army camp.

The ICFTU said it saw continuing widespread forced labour as strong grounds for a reinforcement of measures adopted by the ILO against Burma in June 2000. It said it would at the same time urge the ILO Governing Body to press the Burmese junta to allow for an expansion of ILO monitoring operations in Burma. The ILO Liaison Office in Rangoon has received dozens of complaints by citizens subjected to forced labour. Although the government has so far systematically denied that the cases took place, the ICFTU said citizens had been encouraged by the ILO presence in the country.

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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