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Iraq: Senior trade union leader tortured and killed

BRUSSELS, 6 January 2005, ICFTU Online: The ICFTU today expressed its deep shock and revulsion at the brutal torture and murder of Hadi Salih, International Secretary of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) at his Baghdad home on Tuesday night (4 January). "This vicious murder is nothing less than an attack on the right of Iraqi workers to trade union representation. It is aimed at destabilising and undermining the development of trade unions as cornerstones of development and respect for human rights", said ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder.

Hadi Salih, a prominent Iraqi trade unionist, had returned from exile to Iraq at the beginning of the war, to help build up a democratic trade union movement. He was killed on Tuesday night by assassins who broke into his home. According to a report today from the IFTU, Salih was severely tortured before being put to death. Evidence of torture was visible on his head and body. His hands and legs had been tied. He was blindfolded, then strangled with electrical wire. Iraqi trade union sources believe that the atrocity was carried out by remnants of Saddam Hussein's secret police, the Mukharabat,

Salih, 58, had spent five years in prison under Saddam Hussein, after being sentenced to death in 1969 for independent labour activities. After his sentence was commuted, he had fled Iraq and settled in Sweden, from where he continued to work for labour rights in Iraq. Returning to this native country at the outset of the war, in 2003, he was a founding member of the IFTU, which represents over 200,000 members in the transportation, printing, construction, oil, electricity, railways and food production industries.

Salih's personal courage and commitment to building an authentic workers' movement in Iraq had made a deep impression on delegates he addressed at the 18th World Congress of the ICFTU, held in Miyazaki (Japan), last December. In an ICFTU interview [for full text of the interview, <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221116&Language=EN>], he acknowledged there were "risks in being involved with trade unionism". "War conditions make it very dangerous", he added, though he was dismissive of risks to his personal security. "There is a risk for all civil society organisations, including trade unions. But we, as leaders, are still safe. We have not been targeted, but the teachers' unions have already lost members who were targeted and killed, so did the engineers and the doctors' association, too", he had told the ICFTU.

In fact, Iraqi trade unionists and workers have paid a heavy price to terrorism over the past three months. Several have been murdered and kidnapped while carrying out their trade union activity, or simply at work. Four railroad workers were killed, and their bodies mutilated on 3 November. Two more train drivers were kidnapped on 25 December and five other workers beaten. The building of the Transport and Communications Workers in central Baghdad suffered a mortar attack on 26 December.

The ICFTU General Secretary said the entire international trade union was deeply affected by Salih's murder. "We express our deepest sympathy and condolences to Hadi Salih's family and colleagues", said Ryder, adding that "the international trade union movement will continue to stand by our Iraqi colleagues as they work, in the most difficult circumstances, to build a free and democratic trade union movement and play their part in Iraqi reconstruction and the exercise of democracy and human rights".

The ICFTU represents 148 million workers in 231 affiliated organisations

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