

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

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Tsunami reconstruction: Global Unions' fact-finding mission identifies priorities for action

Brussels, 26 January 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): As trade unions around the world continue to collect millions of dollars to assist the reconstruction effort in the wake of the Tsunami, a mission of international and regional trade union leaders has just returned from Indonesia and Sri Lanka, the two countries most cruelly affected by this unprecedented natural catastrophe.

Emotionally shaken by the destruction "on an absolutely unprecedented and unimaginable scale", the members of the mission have returned with their own testimony to "the massive extent of human distress" observed on the ground, stressing in particular the "horrifying proportion of children among the victims".

Headed by Fred van Leeuwen, General Secretary of Education International (EI) and Chair of the Global Union Federations' (GUFs) General Conference, the mission also included ICFTU Assistant General Secretary Mamounata Cissé, ICFTU-APRO General Secretary Noriyuki Suzuki and regional representatives from Global Union Federations (PSI, IMF, IFBWW).

Based on numerous meetings with local trade unionists and other social actors on the ground, the fact-finding mission was able to supplement the reports already received from the trade unions in the region, with a view to drawing up priorities in terms of the action needed to meet the most urgent reconstruction needs. The mission recommended that the Global Unions should be present in Banda Aceh to monitor and to help unions carry out solidarity assistance programmes.

"The number-one priority is to urgently provide the families of deceased workers, who are completely destitute, with material assistance. Aid is essential for reconstruction of housing. Orphaned children also need assistance in order to be able to continue their education. Post-traumatic psychological assistance for both adults and children is also a priority."

Beyond the most immediate needs, the vital question is raised of what can be done to enable the millions of workers who have lost their livelihoods, particularly the fishing workers who have been massively affected, to find new means of ensuring their survival and that of their families. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that around a million people have been left jobless in Sri Lanka and Indonesia alone, mostly fishing workers, but also many small farmers and small traders. Backing the view of the ILO, which insists on the need for an "intensive job creation strategy to be integrated" into post-tsunami humanitarian and reconstruction programmes, the Global Unions mission also insisted on the need to develop aid programmes for occupational training and increased support for sustainable employment creation projects, through the creation of cooperatives.

The local unions also stressed the need for the international trade union movement to assist them in the fight against the erosion of workers' rights and the danger of more ruthless exploitation of both adult and child workers.

The local trade unionists met by the mission also pointed to the need for trade unions and other civil society organisations to be fully involved in the process of reconstruction. This is unfortunately not the case in Sri Lanka, where the trade unions have not been invited to take part in the national taskforces for reconstruction.

Having witnessed the difficulties on the ground in ensuring that aid distribution reaches the most needy, the mission has confirmed the conviction of the ICFTU and its Global Union partners that pressure must be exerted to ensure that the aid is managed and distributed in a totally transparent and equitable manner.

The Global Unions group is continuing with its efforts to press the international community to honour its reconstruction aid commitments and ensure that priority is given to a sustainable reconstruction of the economies and public infrastructures.

Pending the forthcoming publication of the mission's full report, more information can be found on Education International's special Tsunami site, at the following address: <http://www.ei-ie.org/tsunami/en/index.html>

The ICFTU represents 148 million workers in 231 affiliated organisations in 150 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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