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Trade Preferences Decision: European Commission Incoherent, say Trade Union Bodies

Brussels, 21 December 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): Today's decision by the European Commission to grant special trade preferences to some of the world's worst violators of trade union rights shows serious incoherence in the EU's stated policy of using positive incentives to get its trading partners to respect workers' rights, according to the ICFTU, the WCL and the ETUC. The decision involves giving special trade benefits to 15 countries* under the European Union's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) system.

"The Commission cannot ignore one of the cornerstones of its GSP system and indeed of the EU's fundamental values, respect for basic labour rights, and award special trade preferences to these 15 countries, each of which has been criticised by the UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO) " said ETUC General Secretary John Monks.

The GSP-plus trade regime involves giving preferential access to European markets for goods and services originating in developing countries that meet certain criteria, including respect for core ILO Conventions (freedom of association, collective bargaining, non-discrimination in employment and ending of child and forced labour).

"Countries such as Colombia, Georgia, Moldova, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Guatemala are notorious for violations of basic workers' rights, yet they seem to have been judged by the European Commission to be in full compliance with international standards," said ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder, adding that "In 2004 alone, some 99 trade unionists were murdered in Colombia, continuing a pattern of anti-union violence which has prevailed for many years". Some 95% of killings of Colombian trade unionists go unpunished, according to the ICFTU's Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights Violations.

The international and European trade union bodies provided extensive and detailed dossiers** to the Commission in order to support their call for the Commission to follow its own rules in deciding on the GSP list.

"In two of the countries closest to the European Union, Moldova and Georgia, the authorities have engaged in systematic efforts to undermine legitimate and democratic trade unions", said WCL General Secretary Willy Thys. "The EU countries granted the trade preferences without any conditions. We believe that this decision removes real possibilities to provide incentives for improvements in the situation in these countries"

The union bodies have pointed out that in Sri Lanka, where the textiles sector is expected to be a significant beneficiary of the trade preferences awarded to the country, almost the entire sector is owned by eight families. "As it is now, the preferences are simply a gift to those wealthy local families, but their employees will not gain any real benefit, as the vast majority are not allowed to join unions and bargain for better wages and an end to 12-hour working days", said the union bodies. "The European Commission has missed a real opportunity to help transform the lives of workers in these countries, by weakening a vitally important incentive for the countries concerned to support labour rights for their own workers".

*The countries are: Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, Honduras, Moldova, Mongolia Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Sri Lanka and Venezuela.

** <link to appendix> <http://www.icftu.org/www/PDF/GSP.pdf>

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers through its 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. The ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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