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International Trade Union Confederation

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New ITUC Worldwide Report Reveals Catalogue of Murder, Violence and Intimidation Against Trade Unionists

Brussels, 18 September 2007 (ITUC OnLine): An appalling total of 144 trade unionists were murdered for defending workers' rights in 2006, while more than 800 suffered beatings or torture, according to the Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights Violations, published by the 168-million member International Trade Union Confederation. The 379-page report details nearly 5,000 arrests and more than 8,000 dismissals of workers due to their trade union activities. 484 new cases of trade unionists held in detention by governments are also documented in the report.

³Workers seeking to better their lives through trade union activities are facing rising levels of repression and intimidation in an increasing number of countries. Most shocking of all is the increase of some 25% in the number killed compared to the previous year², said ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder. ³In many of the countries highlighted in the report, repression continued during 2007², he added.

Colombia remained the most perilous place in the world for union activity, with 78 killings, almost all of which were carried out with impunity by paramilitary death squads linked to government officials or acting at the behest of employers. Of 1,165 murders documented between 1994 and 2006, only 56 perpetrators have been brought to trial, and a total of 14 have been sentenced. A wave of anti-union violence in the Philippines is also documented in the Survey, with 33 unionists and worker-rights supporters murdered, in some cases by killers acting in collusion with the military and the police. The report gives accounts of mass dismissals, beatings, detentions and threats against workers and their families used, sometimes routinely, in countries in each region of the world.

Dictatorships and authoritarian governments in Belarus, Burma, China, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Iran, North Korea and several Gulf countries maintained their suppression of independent trade unions, with more than 100 Chinese workers detained in prisons and forced labour camps in appalling conditions. The Zimbabwean government continued its violent repression of the country's trade union movement. Of 265 participants in a trade union protest who were arrested by the authorities, 15 including the top leaders of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions were severely beaten whilst in detention.

The Survey also reports growing government hostility to fundamental workers' rights in some industrialised countries, in particular in Australia, where the government's deceptively-titled ³WorkChoices² legislation stripped workers of a raft of rights and benefits, and imposed heavy restrictions on union activity, with harsh penalties for individual workers and union officials. The government launched prosecutions against 107 construction workers, who faced heavy fines for taking industrial action in support of a health and safety representative who was dismissed. In the United States a National Labour Relations Board Ruling deprived millions of the right to organise, extending the definition of the term ³supervisor², while in Switzerland the government, in a move eventually defeated by the ITUC's Swiss affiliate, tried to invalidate the authority of the ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association with regard to Swiss labour laws.

The anti-union activities of a number of multinational companies, including repeat offenders such as Coca Cola subsidiaries and suppliers, Wal-Mart, Goodyear, Nestlé and Bouygues come under the spotlight. Heavy repression by suppliers to well-known global brand names, especially in the textiles and agriculture sectors, is also described. Several multinationals took advantage of an increasingly hostile environment in Poland to clamp down on workers' rights and conditions.

Women workers in particular continued to face repression, particularly given the exploitation of the mainly female workforce in Export Processing Zones in Asia, Africa and Latin America, with numerous instances of dismissal and outright refusal by employers to recognise even the most fundamental rights

of their employees. In Morocco women textile workers stood trial for organising a strike, while in Mauritius women workers taking part in a sit-in were beaten by police. Abuse of women domestic workers, amongst the most exploited of the world's 90 million migrant workers, is also a prominent feature in several countries, notably in the Gulf States.

In Asia-Pacific, repression of workers in particular in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka, included the dismissal of nearly 5,000 workers for their union activities, and killings of workers in Bangladesh, India as well as in Nepal where two unionists were killed by the army during pro-democracy demonstrations co-organised by the country's trade union movement. Police violence also left scores of workers injured in Cambodia, a country renowned for worker rights violations, and in Malaysia. Violence against trade unionists in Cambodia continued into 2007, where union leader Hy Vuthy was assassinated in February. In Thailand, the military coup led to harassment and dismissal of trade union members and leaders, and in common with a number of other countries in the region, migrant workers were particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Along with the appalling toll of murders in Colombia, violence against trade unionists elsewhere in Latin America included the killing by police of two miners in Mexico and injuries to 41 others, while 15 Ecuadoreans were seriously injured during brutal repression by the police and army of a union-organised demonstration against a free trade agreement with the USA. A woman teachers¹ union leader escaped an assassination attempt in Guatemala, where the long-established pattern of anti-union violence continued into 2007 with the murder of port workers' union leader Pedro Zamora on 15 January. Anti-union activities by Export Processing Zone employers and by plantation owners, including several cases of large-scale dismissals and intimidation of workers, took place in Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. Workers organising unions or participating in strike action in Argentina, Peru and several other countries were dismissed en-masse. Workers were arrested for taking part in union activities in nine countries in the region.

Workers in Africa also faced gross violations of their rights to union organisation and representation. Security forces attacked a union-organised demonstration in Guinea, killing some 20 demonstrators and injuring many more. One municipal worker was killed and several injured during a union protest in Morocco, while in South Africa police fired on striking newspaper employees and some 18 other trade unionists were injured by police in separate incidents. As in Asia, mass dismissals were a common feature, principally in Kenya, where more than 1,000 striking flower plantation workers were sacked, and several of them were injured by police. Public service and education workers faced anti-union discrimination in Algeria, Benin and Ethiopia, where the government continued its harassment of the Teachers¹ Association. The Djibouti union centre UDT was subjected to heavy government harassment, and one of its senior officials had to flee the country in fear for his life. The Libyan and Sudanese governments also maintain heavy restrictions on freedom of association, while Egypt also imposes limits on union rights.

Tentative steps towards trade union rights in Oman and positive developments in Bahrain were overshadowed by continued severe restrictions or outright bans on union activity in much of the Middle East, notably in Saudi Arabia. Restrictions on freedom of association also continued in Jordan, Kuwait and Yemen, and the Syrian authorities exercised virtually total control of the official trade union organisation, the only one allowed. Many migrant workers throughout the Middle East faced hazardous and exploitative working conditions without any effective legal recourse. Iraqi trade unionists faced ongoing and targeted violence. Among the many attacks, one of the most appalling involved a health union leader who was abducted, tortured with an electric drill and then shot to death. Iran continued to deny basic rights to its workers, cracking down hard on independent trade union activity with mass arrests and detentions including that of a 12 year old girl who was beaten and thrown into a police van. Mansour Osanloo, head of the Tehran bus drivers¹ union, was held in solitary confinement for four months, and beaten and arrested a second time in November. Following his release on bail, he was once again arrested by the authorities in July 2007 and remains, along with several colleagues, in prison.

Continued violence in Palestine also affected the trade union movement. In one case, masked men threw a hand-grenade a union-run radio station and then

set it on fire, injuring four people. Continued restrictions on movement of Palestinians between the West Bank and Gaza by the Israeli authorities made trade union activities even more difficult.

In Europe, systematic repression of independent trade unionism remained a feature in Belarus, and the European Union pledged to withdraw trade preference benefits due to the failure of the Lukashenko regime to respect core ILO standards. Employers in Azerbaijan and Turkey were responsible for serious anti-union harassment, while government interference in legitimate trade union affairs was documented in Bosnia/Herzegovina, Lithuania and Moldova. Labour law changes in Russia and Georgia also undermined adherence to union representation and collective bargaining rights.

Yet there is a positive message too. In the foreword to the report, ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder points out that ³Despite all the difficulties, millions of women and men remain firm in their commitment to, or are discovering the benefits of, trade union action².

Saluting the courage of all those who stand up to anti-union repression despite the obvious personal danger they face, Ryder added that ³International solidarity action by trade unions around the world has brought much-needed support to workers whose fundamental rights are being violated. In many of the cases documented in our Survey, global trade union pressure on governments and companies has brought results.² ³Nevertheless,² he warned, ³there are few if any signs of overall improvement since the end of 2006, and governments need to face up to their responsibilities to make sure that global standards adopted at the International Labour Organisation are fully respected everywhere in the world².

To read the Survey in full: <http://survey07.ituc-csi.org/>

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<http://survey07.ituc-csi.org/pressrel.php?IDLang=EN&IDPressrel=4>

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Founded on 1 November 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 305 national affiliates.

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