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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Colombia: reality defies the Colombian government's public statements

Brussels, 13 November 2007 (ITUC OnLine): In a letter to President Álvaro Uribe, ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder today accused the Colombian president of deceitfulness when boasting of improvements in the situation of trade unionists in Colombia.

The murders of three education sector trade unionists in September and November firmly contradict the government's claims. The sad reality is that some 30 trade unionists, including six union leaders, have been assassinated in Colombia so far this year, bringing to almost 560 the total number of trade unionists murdered since President Uribe came to office in 2002. Only a tiny fraction of these murder cases has been cleared up, and even fewer of the perpetrators have been brought to justice. During 2006, 78 trade unionists were assassinated in Colombia, as reported in the ITUC's Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights

[<http://survey07.ituc-csi.org/getcountry.php?IDCountry=COL&IDLang=ES>](http://survey07.ituc-csi.org/getcountry.php?IDCountry=COL&IDLang=ES) .

The ITUC, in a letter sent today to President Uribe ([<http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/asesinatos_de_CabulayesMelo_de_RArcila_Parra_y_Melan_Cardona-2.pdf>](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/asesinatos_de_CabulayesMelo_de_RArcila_Parra_y_Melan_Cardona-2.pdf)) expressed indignation at the incessant murder of union members and leaders and strongly condemned the persecution still being suffered by the union movement.

Leonidas Silva Castro, a teaching union leader and president of the sub-directorate of the teachers' trade union association of Villacaro, in Norte de Santander, was murdered on 2 November.

On 3 November, Giraldo Rey, the president of the sub-directorate of the national fruit industry union, Sinaltraifrut, was murdered in Toro, in the department of Valle. Giraldo Rey was a known defender of the free trade agreement with the U.S. and had travelled to the United States in June to reaffirm his support for the FTA even though the bulk of the Colombian and regional trade union movement is opposed to it. He was set to return to the United States on the 11 of this month to reiterate his support. According to the Colombian press, Vice President Santos ordered the Public Prosecutor to open an investigation into the murder without delay, whilst President Uribe condemned the killing and offered 100 million pesos to anyone providing information regarding the perpetrators - a reaction never before seen in the case of the hundreds of other trade unionist murders, which remain unpunished.

Mercedes Restrepo Campo, a teacher at the "Hernando Botero O'Byrne" school and a member of the sub-directorate of the Valle teachers' union, SUTEV, was murdered on 7 November.

As Guy Ryder says in his letter to President Uribe, the government has for some time been implementing a policy to destroy the trade union movement, placing ever-greater restrictions on the rights of trade unions to operate freely. Attempts to register new trade unions are, for example, being

denied, and union members continue to face employers' threats to restructure - clearly prompted by the desire to disband the unions in their companies rather than any real financial constraints.

It is crucial that swift, serious, and credible results be produced by the Special Unit set up within the Public Prosecutor's Office (following the tripartite agreement signed between the Colombian government, employers and workers on 1 June 2006) to investigate approximately 100 of the most "emblematic" trade unionist murder cases.

According to Guy Ryder, these crimes also clearly contradict the triumphant claims made by Vice President Francisco Santos before the U.S. Congress at the beginning of November regarding the government's success in the fight against the annihilation and persecution of the trade union movement.

In its letter to Álvaro Uribe, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) joined with its Colombian affiliates in expressing its reproof and indignation in the face of these murders. The ITUC has called on the authorities to order immediate and full investigations into these three crimes and to bring those responsible to justice.

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 305 national affiliates. Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org>.

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