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Burma: Ruling junta to blame for murder of top Karen leader, says ITUC

Brussels, 15 February 2008 (ITUC OnLine): As evidence mounts of the Burmese junta's involvement in last night's murder of a top Karen political leader on the Thai-Burma border, the ITUC today expressed its horror and disgust at the assassination of Phado Mahn Sha, General Secretary of the Karen National Union (KNU), representing Burma's second-largest ethnic nationality group. Mahn Sha, aged 64, was killed last night, 14 February, by two Karen-speaking assailants who entered his house in Maesod, a town situated inside Thailand on the Burmese border. According to the Federation of Trade Unions - Burma (FTUB, an ITUC associate organisation), the 4x4 vehicle used by the assassins belongs to a Thai business partner of the DKBA, a proxy Karen militia controlled by Burma's military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The attackers reportedly climbed the stairs to Mahn Shar's flat while he was finishing his meal, greeted him in the Karen language, then drew their guns and shot him twice in the chest. The victim died on the spot.

Mahn Sha was considered as the top leader of the KNU, an ethnic political movement supporting Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) and other democratic opposition parties in Burma. The KNU, which has struggled for decades to secure increased recognition of Karen peoples' rights inside the Burmese federation, is widely known for sheltering and assisting victims of forced labour and other egregious human rights violations committed by SPDC and its proxy Karen militia, the DKBA. The so-called Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, a para-military structure armed and controlled by the SPDC, has for over 10 years been denounced by the ITUC and its predecessor organisation, the ICFTU, as being responsible for murders, torture, rape, imposition of forced labour and forced recruitment of child soldiers in Burma's Karen State, which borders Thailand.

"This wicked murder must be fully investigated by Thai authorities and the relevant international agencies and its authors, both material and intellectual, brought to justice, as soon and wherever possible", said ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder. "If, as we have every reason to believe, the SPDC is ultimately responsible for it, this killing should help prove to the international community that Burma's corrupt and murderous regime is not in the least interested in bringing about even the slightest degree of democracy to the country and its citizens, whether through a bogus referendum, so-called national elections or any other deceptive method", he added. The SPDC has last week-end declared it would hold a "Constitutional referendum" next May and organise national elections in 2010, an announcement widely denounced by Burma's democracy movement and many foreign governments as a scam designed to relieve mounting international political and economic pressure on the junta.

The ITUC said Burma's neighbours, particularly India, China and ASEAN member countries now had to face up to their historic responsibilities towards Burma and its 47 million people. China, in particular, has come under strong criticism in international circles for using its veto power to block UN Security Council resolutions aimed at compelling Burma's ruling junta to release Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners and engage in a

genuine dialogue with the democratic opposition and representatives of ethnic nationalities. In the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, Burmese groups around the world have also increasingly drawn parallels between the situation in Sudan's western Darfur province and Burma, pointing at China's reluctance to use its considerable influence over both Sudan and Burma over their respective human rights crises.

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 311 national affiliates. Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org>

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