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Guatemala: Armed Attack Against Trade Union Leader

Brussels, 23 June 2008 (ITUC OnLine): Guatemala has seen renewed anti-union violence in the month of June, in flagrant violation of ILO Conventions on fundamental workers' rights which the country has ratified.

On 8 June, armed men attacked Freddy Morales Villagrán, a member of the consultative committee of SITRAPETEN (Sindicato de los trabajadores y trabajadoras de Agua Salvavidas), affiliated to the CGTG and FESTRAS-UITA. Villagrán was seriously injured and had to be taken to hospital.

The attack took place amid a serious dispute between Morales Villagrán's union and the management of the Agua Salvavidas company. The conflict began in February, when SITRAPETEN initiated the process of registering the union, strictly observing the procedures established by the national labour legislation and international standards. The company and the central government, through the Labour Ministry, responded with an aggressive campaign of harassment and repression, including the issue of death threats to SITRAPETEN's members.

The management placed huge pressure on the workers to withdraw from the union; when they refused, the company declared itself bankrupt. The workers decided to peacefully take over the company's installations, but were abducted and beaten by private security guards. The dispute remains unresolved.

The ITUC and the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA) have condemned this deplorable situation. The ITUC has also called on employers throughout Guatemala to respect their workers' fundamental rights, such as the right to organise and bargain collectively. The Castillo Hermanos group, which owns the company, clearly has a key responsibility in resolving the dispute and ensuring respect for the workers' right to form and join the union of their own choosing.

In a letter to the Guatemalan authorities, http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/violencia_y_atropellos_en_Guatemala.pdf, the ITUC called on President Álvaro Colom (who announced his commitment to end the violence against trade unionists during the ITUC Conference against impunity held in Guatemala in January 2008) to order a full investigation into the attack against Freddy Morales Villagrán, to identify the material and intellectual authors and to bring them to justice.

"Urgent measures must be taken in Guatemala," said Guy Ryder, General Secretary of the ITUC. "It is essential that an immediate end be brought to the violence hitting the Guatemalan trade union movement."

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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