

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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DR Congo: women trade unionists present en masse at World March of Women and adopt statement advocating social dialogue to fight conflicts and violence against women

Brussels, 21 October 2010 (ITUC OnLine): The streets of Bukavu (DR Congo) resounded on Sunday with the voices of thousands of women from all around the world, marching with colourful banners to express solidarity with the women victims of the sexual violence plaguing this eastern part of DR Congo. Among them, Congolese women trade unionists and their sisters from eleven African countries, accompanied by representatives from the ITUC and its regional organisation ITUC-Africa, asserted a strong trade union presence at this event calling for an end to impunity, reparation for the women victims in DR Congo, and the establishment of a lasting peace in the region.

"Our presence here alongside the Congolese women trade unionists, echoing their solidarity with their chants at this march, bears witness to the support we want to give to the Congolese women who have been and continue to be the victims of violence. The international trade union movement is strongly urging the authorities in the DRC and other countries of the region, as well as the international community as a whole, to take measures to secure a lasting peace in the region, which is key to ending the violence against women," said Kattia Paredes of the ITUC Equality Department.

On the eve of the march, a delegation of women trade unionists went to Mwenga, a place tragically symbolic of the extreme violence perpetrated against women in this region. At the end of a five-hour journey on a red earth track cutting through the war-torn hills, the delegation took part in the commemoration ceremony of the World March of Women (WMW), paying homage to the thirteen women and two men tortured and buried alive in October 1999 by soldiers of the armed rebel movement of the time (RDC Goma).

Over ten years later, mass rapes are still taking place in this Congolese region, Kivu, which is prey to rival military factions. According to the latest information published by the UN, over 15,000 rapes were committed last year in eastern DRC, where armed groups control vast areas and are often interspersed among the civilian population. UN reports state that 500 people, including children, were raped in late July-early August, by a coalition of Maï-Maï fighters and Hutu rebels belonging to the FDLR (Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda) in 13 villages in Walikale (North Kivu province). Soldiers in the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC) are also accused of rapes, massacres and looting.

Josée Shimbi of CSC-Congo, on addressing the WMW, underlined "the major contradiction between the country's vast resources and the abject poverty in which the majority of the population lives, especially the women."

The links between poverty, bad governance, the huge decent work deficit and conflicts leading to violence against women on a massive scale were examined during the trade union conference held in Bukavu on 14 and 15 October, on the fringes of the WMW activities. The fifty delegates discussed ways of strengthening women's participation in social dialogue, as a key tool in conflict prevention and resolution, and especially as a means of protecting women war victims. They called on the Congolese authorities to take measures to promote decent work and to introduce effective mechanisms to protect workers' rights, especially in the country's mining industry. This resource-rich sector is plagued by predatory practices that violate human and trade union rights on a daily basis, for the sole benefit of the armed groups controlling the trafficking of these

resources and the multinational companies that profit the most from them.

Representatives of the Congolese government, the ILO and UN Women also took part in this trade union conference. Myrtle Witbooi, general secretary of the South African domestic workers' union SADSAWU, came to testify how domestic workers, often unrecognised and unprotected, are particularly vulnerable to the violence perpetrated against women in this region and the world at large. She insisted on the need for the trade union movement to press governments to adopt the draft international Convention on domestic work next June in Geneva.

The trade union conference closed with the adoption of a statement (<http://www.ituc-csi.org/women-trade-unionists-at-the.html?lang=en>) which will be followed up by an action plan to be implemented under the auspices of ITUC-Africa.

For Sharan Burrow, general secretary of the ITUC, "Impunity must be brought to an end and justice must be done for all those women suffering en masse from these conflicts. Vested interests linked to the region's wealth of natural resources must stop taking precedence over respect for the lives and dignity of women."

-See the photo gallery of the trade union participation in the World March of Women in Bukavu: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ituc/sets/72157625209599222/>

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