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Extortion by Al-Shabaab in Somalia: 3253 Telecommunications Workers Deprived of a Living

Brussels, 5 October 2011 (ITUC OnLine): On 2 October, the Islamist militant group al-Shabaab banned the operations of three telecom companies, paralysing the telecommunications system in eight regions of the country. TELCOM Somalia, Nation Link Telecommunication Company and Dahabsihiil had refused to pay the sums of money the militants were attempting to illegally extort from them.

"Together with the recent murders of nine Somali workers following their refusal to bow to the same totally unacceptable practice of extorting funds in exchange for the right to work, these new incidents demonstrate the ever-growing difficulties faced by Somali workers in the struggle to make a living," denounced ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow.

The three companies affected, two of which are the main private companies in the sector, have asked their employees not to come to work until further notice. According to Somalia's telecoms and postal workers' union STPU, 3253 workers have been left out of work as a result.

"Because these companies have refused to bow to the attempts to extort money from them, al-Shabaab has made a deliberate decision to jeopardize the country's economy and communications system. We condemn them for having decided to deprive 3253 workers of their source of earnings," said STPU General Secretary Mohamed Omar Mohamud. The Federation of Somali Trade Unions (FESTU) has also strongly condemned the move and expressed its solidarity with the telecommunication workers living in the regions controlled by al-Shabaab militants, as well as with the STPU, which is now confronted with an illegal and unjust situation.

Omar Faruk Osman, general secretary of the FESTU, described the ban as an affront to the rights of the workers and the companies concerned. "We are more than ever concerned about

the rights and welfare of telecommunication workers in these central and southern regions, and are calling on al-Shabaab to immediately overturn its decision," he added.

This ban could have grave consequences for the people affected, as in addition to cutting off their livelihood, it threatens to exacerbate the famine currently plaguing Somalia, especially in these regions where the United Nations has already declared a famine.

Tightening the noose on Somali workers

In regions close to Mogadishu, al-Shabaab militants are also putting pressure on small businesses, forcing them to pay "Zakat" (a portion of their earnings) to them.

The events of 2 October above all stand as a reminder of the crime committed just six weeks prior, when nine workers were murdered for the same reason, that is, for having refused to pay the sums the Islamist militants were trying to extort from them.

The ITUC has joined with the Somali unions in condemning these totally unacceptable practices that are strangling workers' rights and freedoms by the day.

The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 305 affiliated national organisations from 151 countries and territories.

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