

Global unions, Amnesty international: "No to impunity for the murderers of trade unionists in Colombia"

Geneva, December 10, 2003 (ACTRAV Info): Colombia holds the grim record for the highest level of violence against labour leaders with 184 trade unionists killed in 2002 and 64 during 2003. Yet, according to testimonies by Global Unions and Amnesty International representatives, most of these murders have gone unpunished. The trade union and human rights campaigners were addressing a public meeting in Geneva on the occasion of Human Rights Day, 10 December ahead of a meeting with Colombia's acting ambassador in Switzerland.



Hans Engelberts, general secretary of Public Services International expressed disappointment at the failure of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to establish a Commission of Inquiry on Colombia because of opposition by governments and employers groups in this tripartite UN agency. "How many more killings before governments and employers agree

to move on this tragic situation?" he asked. He said public services trade unions will renew their campaign and lobby governments into action. Most of the killings in Colombia affect the public sector, and in particular teachers. Speaking for Education International, Martha Scarpato said that schools are being used by various groups involved in the violence in Colombia. She added that 52 per cent of the teachers killed in Colombia were women. "Schools should be respected as territory of peace" she said. Patricia Scanella from Amnesty International underlined that most of the attacks on Colombian trade unionists were taking place during labour disputes. She feared that measures taken by the Colombian government not only are falling short of combating violence but could actually result in the resurgence of paramilitary groups. "We do not think the government has taken steps to provide security for trade unionists", she said, announcing that Amnesty would continue its campaign targeted at national governments and international institutions. Efforts will also be made to convince employers to join the call for a Commission of Inquiry to be set by the ILO.

The ILO is, however, active on Colombia. According to Elizabeth Tinoco, from the ILO Bureau for Workers' activities, a 6-point programme is being carried out, focusing mainly on the protection of trade unionists and the promotion of freedom of association. The programme has helped dozens of threatened trade unionists to find a provisional sanctuary in other countries. She, however, sent a note of caution about the sustainability of such programmes unless governments commit additional resources.

Speaking on behalf of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions

(ICFTU), Anna Biondi referred to the theme adopted for this year's Human Rights day by the UN "Know Your Human Rights" reminding that trade union rights are human rights and that trade unions worldwide are among the key promoter of human rights. While underlining the need to draw the international community's attention to the unacceptable situation in Colombia, she also cited serious violations of trade union rights in countries like Belarus, Burma, and China, Zimbabwe as well as the failure of governments to stop attacks on union rights by employers in Australia, Canada, South Korea and the United States.

After the meeting a Global Union delegation went to the Colombian embassy in Geneva and handed over a letter addressed by ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder to Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe Vélez. In the letter, the ICFTU leader denounced the impunity for the murderers of trade unionists in Colombia. "Practically all of those crimes have gone unpunished", he said. The authorities seem, however, to have more determination to act against trade unionists: at least 132 of them have been arrested in 2003 for doing nothing more than engaging in legitimate trade union activities.

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