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Colombia: One of world's most dangerous places for trade unionists

A sham paramilitary demobilization process, combined with thousands of cases of threats and killings and a chronic lack of investigations and prosecutions, makes Colombia one of the most dangerous places in the world for trade unionists, according to a new report released today.

Amnesty International's report, *Killings, arbitrary detentions, and death threats -- the reality of trade unionism in Colombia*, highlights a pattern of systematic attacks against trade unionists involved in labour disputes and in campaigns against privatization and in favour of workers' rights in some areas where extractive industries operate.

Colombia's National Trade Union School documented 2,245 killings, 3,400 threats and 138 forced disappearances of trade unionists between January 1991 and December 2006. Despite their supposed demobilization, army-backed paramilitaries and the security forces are thought to be behind most attacks. Guerrilla groups have also been responsible for such killings.

"Trade unionists across Colombia are being sent a clear message: Don't complain about your labour conditions or campaign to protect your rights because you will be silenced, at any cost," said Susan Lee, Amnesty International's Americas Programme Director.

"By failing to adequately protect trade unionists, the Colombian authorities are sending a message that abuses against them can continue, while companies operating in Colombia risk being held accountable for human rights abuses for which, through their conduct, they may bear responsibility."

The report includes the cases of human rights abuses against trade unionists -- and their relatives -- working in Colombia's health, education, public services, agricultural, mining, oil, gas, energy and food sectors.

Amnesty International is calling on companies working in Colombia to use their influence with the Colombian government to end and prevent human rights abuses against trade unionists.

"This report is a wake-up call for any multinational company operating in an environment in which human rights are systematically violated. Inaction is no longer an option," said Susan Lee.

Successive Colombian governments have implemented policies to improve the safety of trade unionists, including a programme that allocates armed escorts, bullet-proof vehicles and telephones to some threatened trade unionists.

“While such measures are welcome, attacks against trade unionists will continue unless effective measures are taken to end the impunity enjoyed by those killing and threatening them.”

Amnesty International’s report also highlights the Tripartite Agreement signed by the Colombian government, Colombian business representatives and Colombia’s trade union confederations in June 2006, under the auspices of the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The agreement provides for the establishment of a permanent presence of the ILO in Colombia to monitor the application of freedom of association rights in the country and progress in efforts to advance investigations into the killing of trade unionists.

“The International Labour Organization (ILO) agreement is a key opportunity to tackle the human rights crisis facing trade unionists. It is now imperative that the Colombian authorities, multinational and Colombian companies, and the international labour movement work together with the office of the ILO in Bogotá to ensure investigations into all cases of threats and attacks against trade unionists and their relatives.”

For a list of some of the case studies included in Amnesty International's report, please see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR230162007>

A copy of Amnesty International's report *Killings, arbitrary detentions, and death threats -- the reality of trade unionism in Colombia* will be available from 3 July on: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR230012007>

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