

Colombia: Mayday for trade unionists

With at least 112 trade unionists killed in 2000 and 35 in the first three months of 2001, international labour day will not be a day of celebration in Colombia, Amnesty International said today.

Trade union members and activists are among the main targets of human rights violations -- including killings, "disappearances", threats and intimidation -- in the context of the spiralling armed conflict in Colombia. Army-backed paramilitary groups are responsible for most attacks against trade unionists, although guerrilla groups have also targeted activists they believe to be collaborating with the security or paramilitary forces.

"Inaction by the authorities in the face of this crisis has led to a dramatic escalation in violations against trade unionists," Amnesty International said, noting that four times as many trade unionists were killed in the first three months of 2001 as in the same period last year.

"Measures adopted so far to guarantee the security of trade unionists through government protection programs are clearly insufficient and half-hearted," the organization added. "What the authorities have shown is a clear lack of political will to tackle the problem at the roots, dismantling paramilitary groups and bringing to justice all those responsible for attacks on trade unionists."

This failure to act is made even more disturbing by evidence, uncovered by judicial investigations, linking state agents to cases of human rights violations against trade unionists. One example of this was

the attempted murder of trade union leader Wilson Borja Díaz in December 2000, in which several active and retired military and police officers were found to be implicated. Immediately after the attack, national paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño admitted responsibility for it.

"As the world celebrates the struggle and achievements of workers and trade unions, we renew our call on the Colombian authorities to show they take the protection of trade unionists' human rights seriously," Amnesty International said.

Measures that authorities should take immediately include providing adequate resources for protection programs; disbanding paramilitary groups and severing their ties with state agents; investigating fully and impartially all cases of human rights violations against trade unionists and bringing those responsible to justice.

The need to combat impunity and take "action against those who are the source of risks, especially the paramilitary groups" as a fundamental step to protect and guarantee the rights of all, and in particular those of human rights defenders and trade unionists, was also reiterated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in her report on Colombia recently presented at the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Background

In the first three months of 2001, 300 trade union members have reportedly asked the Colombian Government for help in leaving the country. The president of the *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Colombia*, (CUT), Colombian Trade Union Congress, Luis Eduardo Garzón was quoted in AFP on 20 April 2001 condemning the low rate of arrests in cases of killings and attempted killings of trade unionists. He reportedly told AFP that since 1987, 3100 trade union leaders had

been killed and only the case of the failed attempt on the life of Wilson Borja was being investigated.

Measures to guarantee the security of trade unionists would be in line with ILO standards and repeated recommendations made by the United Nations. The March 2001 report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' Office on Colombia concludes that the state has not decisively assumed its responsibility to guarantee the safety of trade unions and other sectors particularly at risk.

The Colombian government has taken some steps to guarantee the security of trade unionists particularly through its *Programa de Protección a Testigos y Personas Amenazadas*, Protection Program for Witnesses and Threatened Persons, which is administered by the Ministry of the Interior. Through this programme security service bodyguards have been provided to some threatened trade unionists and others have been assisted to leave the country. The program, however, does not have sufficient resources.

The proposal, during the International Labour Conference (ILC) in June 2000, to create an ILO investigation mission for Colombia to investigate and monitor the human rights situation facing trade unionists, was blocked by the Colombian government. The ILC decided instead to appoint a Special Representative for cooperation with Colombia to assist in and verify the actions taken by the government and by employers and workers unions to implement ILO Recommendations. Amnesty International believes that a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the widespread and systematic attacks against trade unionists in Colombia should be agreed by the ILC.

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