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International Labour Conference: Time for concrete action

(Geneva) Amnesty International today called on the International Labour Conference (ILC) to take concrete action on a number of countries currently on its agenda. During the 91st ILC session, the organization is highlighting the human rights situation in Colombia, Iran, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Mauritania and Sudan.

"All of these countries have been on the ILC agenda for years -- yet little improvement has been seen on the ground," Amnesty International stated.

In the case of Colombia, Amnesty International stated that trade unionists in that country continue to be killed and harassed as a direct consequence of their trade union activity.

"Most violations against trade unionists take place at times of labour dispute. Amongst trade unionists who have been most targeted for human rights violations are those campaigning against the privatization of health, education and municipal services sectors."

During 2002, more than 170 trade unionists were victims of extrajudicial executions in Colombia and 164 received death threats. In the same period, seven trade unionists "disappeared", 26 were kidnapped, 17 were victims of an attempted kidnapping, seven were forcibly displaced, over 130 were arbitrarily detained and around 80 sought asylum. The vast majority of human rights violations against trade unionists continue to be undertaken by army-backed paramilitaries.

"Featuring Colombia prominently in the agenda is not enough -- the ILO must establish a commission to examine widespread and systematic attacks against trade unionists and to devise strategies aimed at preventing further violations," Amnesty International urged.

The majority of the politically-motivated killings, threats and "disappearances" against trade unionists have been committed with total impunity and in violation of International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions that the government has ratified. The March 2003 report of the 286th session of the Governing Body of the ILO indicates that of 346 cases occurring between 2000 and 2002 of killings, threats and "disappearances" which it had examined, none had resulted in a conviction.

Despite strong prima facie evidence, judicial investigations into many cases against trade union leaders have failed to advance, for example:

Jorge Ortega, a leader of the *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Colombia*, Colombian Trade Union Congress, was killed in Bogotá on 20 October 1998. Two former police officers have been implicated in the attack and are in prison. However, no information has been received to indicate that those who

planned and paid for the killing have been identified or brought to justice.

Investigations into the attempt on the life of trade union leader Wilson Borja in December 2000 in Bogotá, implicated high-ranking army officers. No information has been received to indicate that those responsible for the attack, responsibility for which was claimed by national paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño, have been brought to justice.

Echoing the anti-discrimination theme of the 91st session of the International Labour Conference (ILC), Amnesty International today called on member states to take effective legislative and administrative measures to end discrimination.

"Freedom from discrimination is one of the most fundamental principles underlying international human rights law," Amnesty International said.

During the 91st session, Amnesty International is also drawing attention to discriminatory practices in Iran, Israel and the Occupied Territories and Sudan:

In Iran, a process called *gozinesh* or 'selection', impairs equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation for those seeking employment in the public and parastatal sector and, reportedly, parts of the private sector. The *gozinesh* accords itself the role of investigating an individual's political opinion, previous political affiliation or support, or religious affiliation.

In the Occupied Territories, increasing restrictions imposed by Israel on the movement of Palestinians -- such as closures and curfews -- have had a devastating impact on the lives of most Palestinians, including on the right to work. Unemployment has risen from about 10% in 2000, to approximately 50% in early 2003.

In Sudan, restrictions on freedom of expression, and the harassment and detention of journalists and editors continue. Sudanese security forces have confiscated, fined and arbitrarily suspended newspapers which have criticized actions of the government or otherwise exercised their right to freedom of expression. Forced labour persists in the country and the government has failed to investigate the fate of thousands who remain unaccounted for.

"Despite the grave human rights situation in Sudan, it is regretful that Sudan will not be debated at this session of the ILC," Amnesty International said.

In addition, Amnesty International is also drawing attention to the situation in Mauritania, where slavery remains a problem. Extensive human rights abuses connected to slavery are committed with impunity and those formerly held in slavery suffer continuing discrimination.

Discrimination is the basis for two of the ILO's eight "core" Conventions, nos. 100 and 111. Amnesty International is urging all ILO member states to ratify these 'core' treaties.

"China, Japan and the USA -- because they are countries of chief industrial importance and permanent members of the ILO's Governing Body -- must lead by example," Amnesty International said.

"Equality of opportunity and treatment is an essential principle of the ILO that member states must now make a reality," Amnesty International concluded.

Background

The ILO is the UN's specialized agency with global responsibility for employment, work and labour market issues. It comprises 175 member states and is unique in constituting a tripartite structure of government, employers and trade unions. Although the ILC meets once a year, its 56-member executive body -- the Governing Body -- meets three times a year. The ILO elaborates legally-binding Conventions, of which

eight are 'core' and cover the following areas: freedom of association (ILO Convention numbers 87 and 98), discrimination (numbers 100 and 111), forced labour (numbers 29 and 105) and child labour (numbers 38 and 182).

Each year, the ILO produces a "global report", which is an overview of the progress made in the preceding four year period, in relation to one of the four principles enshrined in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. The theme of this year's global report is discrimination. The 91st session of the ILC is taking place in Geneva, Switzerland from 3 to 19 June 2003.

Public Document

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