IN 2001, THE KILLINGS OF TRADE UNIONISTS IN COLOMBIA REACHED A DRAMATIC NEW LEVEL. AT LEAST 185 PEOPLE LOST THEIR LIVES OWING TO THEIR UNION ACTIVITIES, 27% MORE THAN IN THE PREVIOUS YEAR. NEARLY 2,000 OTHER TRADE UNION ACTIVISTS HAVE RECEIVED DEATH THREATS OVER THE LAST FOUR YEARS, 203 IN 2001. TWELVE TRADE UNIONISTS DISAPPEARED AND 37 OTHERS WERE KIDNAPPED, 23 SUFFERED PERSONAL ATTACKS AND 12 MORE WERE PERSECUTED. IN ADDITION, 56 TRADE UNIONISTS WERE FORCIBLY DISPLACED AND FOUR BOMB ATTACKS WERE CARRIED OUT ON TRADE UNION HEADQUARTERS. THE ENTIRE COUNTRY IS AFFECTED BY THIS VIOLENCE. THE VAST MAJORITY OF KILLINGS ARE BLAMED ON THE PARAMILITARIES (ROUGHLY 89%). NONE OF THE MURDERERS HAS BEEN BROUGHT TO JUSTICE.

Key facts

- In 2000, the adoption of law No. 584 responded to some observations made by the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, but other recommendations remained in abeyance, including in particular the right to strike in public services and obstacles to collective bargaining per sector of activity.
- In February 2000, an ILO direct contacts mission visited the country.
- In 2001, the mandate of the Special Representative of the Director-General of the ILO in Colombia came to an end, but the ILO maintained its presence in Colombia by means of a Permanent Office.
- At least 185 trade unionists were murdered in Colombia in 2001.
- In its report published in March 2002, the ILO’s Committee on Freedom of Association complained that the government had not replied to any of the allegations concerning the murders of union activists and threats which characterised 2001 and that only partial information had been provided with respect to the murders and threats in previous years.
- The degree of impunity for these acts is estimated at 97%.
- In June 2000, the ILO Governing Body, referring to a complaint lodged under Article 26 of the ILO Constitution, postponed a decision on the establishment of a Commission of Enquiry. The Governing Body subsequently adopted a provisional report in which it regretted the lack of progress regarding the situation.
- In consultation with its constituents, the ILO devised a special technical assistance programme for Colombia, part of which is already being implemented.
- In 2002, Colombia’s trade union organisations renewed their call for the establishment of an ILO Commission of Enquiry.
Special paragraph

In its report adopted by the International Labour Conference in 2001, the Committee on the Application of Standards devoted a special paragraph to Colombia in relation with Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association and the Protection of the Right to Organise, 1948. That paragraph reads as follows:

The Committee took note of the oral information provided by the Government representative and the subsequent debate. In its previous conclusions the Committee had observed with great concern the significant and persistent discrepancies between the legislation and practice, and the provisions of the Convention had given rise to several complaints to the Committee on Freedom of Association, and a complaint submitted by a number of Worker members to the International Labour Conference in June 1998, under article 26 of the Constitution of the ILO relating to non-observance of Convention No. 87. The Committee noted that the Committee of Experts had observed with great concern the significant progress in legislation and practice, and the provisions of the Convention with respect to the majority of the legislative provisions that had been referred to the Committee of Experts. The Committee further observed that the Government was committed to promoting measures relating to the other provisions on which the Committee of Experts had commented. The Committee considered that strengthening social dialogue between the social partners would be the best way of conducting that activity. The Committee noted with concern that many complaints concerning violent acts and discrimination against trade unionists continued to be submitted to the ILO. The Committee recalled that the full respect for civil liberties was essential for the application of the Convention. The Committee emphasized that the climate of impunity in the country represented a serious threat to the exercise of trade union freedom. The Committee urged the Government to take further steps to bring legislation and practice into full conformity with the Convention in the near future. It expressed the firm hope that the Government would provide a detailed report to the next meeting of the Committee of Experts with news of greater progress in legislation and practice to ensure the application of that Convention and recalled that it could call on the technical assistance of the Office in the context of that process. The Commission expressed the firm hope that at its next meeting it would be in a position to take note of real progress in the country's trade union situation. In that respect, the Committee noted that the complaint submitted under article 26 of the Constitution of the ILO was pending before the Governing Body. The Commission expressed the hope that the Governing Body at its next meeting would take appropriate, effective and necessary measures to deal with that complaint.

Trade union demands

In view of the gravity of the situation in Colombia, the Workers’ Group is demanding:

- That the Colombian government immediately take the necessary steps to provide protection for trade unionists and guarantee their right to live and ensure that the killings stop.
- That the perpetrators of the murders, attacks and threats against Colombian trade unionists are identified and brought to justice.
- That the government take steps to put an end to the anti-union practices which are threatening the autonomous functioning and existence of the country's trade union organisations and that it do all it can to apply law No. 144 of 1997 on collective bargaining in the public sector.
- That the ILO make a priority of fully implementing the plan to cooperate with Colombia, whose main objective must be to protect the life and physical integrity of trade union representatives.
- That the ILO's Governing Body decide to set up a Commission of Enquiry on Freedom of Association and the Protection of the Right to Organise (Convention No. 87) in Colombia.
- That the trade union movement around the world express its solidarity with Colombia's trade unionists.
- That the employers' organisations become fully involved in the ILO's initiatives aimed at promoting freedom of association in Colombia.

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