

Global trade union reports 144 activists killed in 2006

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PARIS — Nearly 150 labour activists were killed worldwide in 2006, a new global trade union said in a report Tuesday outlining a rising tide of violence and harassment against unionists across the globe.

The number killed of activists killed rose to 144 from 115 in 2005, while 800 were injured or tortured and more than 5,000 arrested and 500 jailed, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) said.

A single country, Colombia, accounted for more than half the victims with 78 unionists killed last year, according to the ITUC's first annual survey of rights violations since being founded in November 2006.

Colombian President Alvaro Uribe is spending millions to "tell the world that the situation in Colombia is improving ... instead of using its resources to tackle the real problem," ITUC secretary general Guy Ryder says in the report.

"They are lying," he said.

Those killed included Jose Gregorio Izquierdo, a public service union leader, murdered after receiving threats from paramilitary groups, Daniel Cortez Cortez, an electrician shot dead at work, and farmers Jose Mario Guerrero Garzon and Hector Jairo Yate.

Violence against unionists soared worldwide, with the outlook particularly worrying in parts of Asia and across Africa.

In the Philippines, at least 33 unionists were killed in "an orgy of extrajudicial violence," ITUC said, charging that members of the government or security forces were guilty in several high-profile cases.

The ITUC said a "prevailing atmosphere of impunity" in the country had further undermined labour rights, "with many other trade unionists facing intimidation, abduction and even torture."

One Filipino factory worker and activist, Rogelio Concepcion, was abducted by armed men on a motorcycle and later found dead, his body bearing marks of torture.

Across Africa in 2006, the report said the "use of disproportionate force against trade union protestors and striking workers was a depressingly common occurrence."

In Guinea for example, the report said, at least 11 people were killed during national demonstrations organised by the country's two main unions.

Dozens of labour activists were kept in jail in China, Myanmar and Cuba for pursuing independent trade union work, while in countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, trade unions remained banned altogether.

In the United States, it said "millions more were deprived of organising and bargaining rights" after a federal ruling expanded the definition of a "supervisor," who do not have the right to vote in union elections.

In Europe, meanwhile, the ITUC quoted the corporate social responsibility firm Vigeo as saying that less than 10 percent of all companies fully upheld union rights and promote collective bargaining.

The Brussels-based ITUC was created in November 2006 from the merger of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the World Confederation of Labour.

The new confederation, which represents 168 million workers in 154 countries, is calling for a global trade system which protects developing countries and for the World Trade Organization to adopt labour rights targets.