Education International

Colombia: more teachers murdered

Educators around the world are condemning the latest brutal assassinations of teacher trade unionists in Colombia. On 1 April, Emerson Ivan Herrera Ruales and Luz Mariela Diaz Lopez lost their lives at the hands of unknown gunmen who shot them as they made their way to work in the morning.

Both were teachers at a rural school in Valle del Guamez, in the department of Putumayo. Compounding the atrocity of the crime is the fact that Diaz Lopez was seven months pregnant at the time she was murdered.

The Human Rights Commission has issued a statement from the Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE) calling on the government to investigate their deaths and bring the killers to justice.

"FECODE rejects these abhorrent recent crimes and demands once again that the national authorities urgently conduct all necessary and decisive investigations in order to break the chain of impunity that regularly characterises the assassinations of teachers," it said. "We find that the only response from the education authorities is the opposite of solidarity, negligence and administrative contempt."

The union federation also exhorted the departmental authorities to guarantee and respect the fundamental rights of all educators in Putumayo, who face daily threats due to the actions of different players in the ongoing civil conflict in Colombia.

Education International is also calling on the government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe to abide by its obligations under international law to guarantee the fundamental right to freedom of association, including the safety and security of all trade unionists in Colombia.

"Education International and its members around the world are speaking with one voice. This killing has got to stop! Impunity for murder of trade unionists cannot be allowed. Those responsible for these heinous crimes must be brought to justice," said EI General Secretary Fred van Leeuwen.

The murders of Herrera and Diaz are only the latest in a horrendous death toll of Colombian trade unionists so far this year. Statistics issued before their deaths include the latest report from the respected Colombian NGO, Escuela Sindical Nacional, which notes the assassination of 17 workers since the beginning of 2008. According to the British NGO, Justice For Colombia, nine trade unionists were killed in the month of March alone.

Among the dead are the following teachers, who were activists in FECODE member organisations:

- Ramiro de Jesús Pérez Zapata, killed on 12 January in San Jeronimo in Antioquia department.
- Maria del Carmen Mesa Pasachoa, killed on 8 February in Tame in Arauca department.
- Carmen Cecilia Carvajal, killed on 4 March in the town of Ocaña in Norte de Santander department.
- Gildardo Antonio Gomez Alzate, killed on 7 March in the city of Medellín in Antioquia department.
- Víctor Manuel Muñoz, killed on 12 March in the town of Codazzi in Cesar department.
- Emerson Ivan Herrera Ruales, killed on 1 April in the town of Valle del Guamez in Putumayo department.
- Luz Mariela Diaz Lopez, also killed on 1 April in Valle del Guamez in Putumayo department.

Unfortunately, as is typical in such cases, no one has been arrested or charged in connection with any of these murders.

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