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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

Iraq: Grave Fears for Kidnapped Migrant Workers

Brussels, 25 June 2014 (ITUC OnLine): The ITUC has expressed grave fears for migrant workers trapped in the fighting in Iraq, with reports emerging that extremist group ISIS plans to use 39 kidnapped Indian workers as human shields. ISIS has shown no willingness to discuss release of the 39, whom it seized in Mosul. 46 Indian nurses are also said to be stranded in a Tikrit hospital.

Iraqi workers and their unions have also been a focus for the extremists, with reports of Teachers' Union offices occupied by armed men and union activists targeted by ISIS. Workers in other sectors, including the oil industry, are in continuous danger from the fighting between ISIS and anti-ISIS forces. Meanwhile, the government drive to enrol up to 1.5 million workers in militias to defend against ISIS is believed to include forced recruitment.

Thousands of migrant workers, including hundreds whose passports are held by company bosses, are at serious risk of abduction or worse, including some 2,000 Nepalese working in the country in spite of a Nepal government ban on migrant workers going to Iraq.

Women in areas under the control of ISIS are at extreme risk of sexual violence, with reports of some women even committing suicide.

"Iraq is facing a toxic combination of the results of authoritarian government, and Gulf-financed fundamentalists who are threatening amputations for theft and forcing women to stay indoors. The latest upsurge in violence is putting more and more workers and their families in the firing line, and the damage to economy, society and livelihoods will be long-lasting," said ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow.

"Since the toppling of Saddam Hussein, workers have tried to build genuine trade union organisations but have been hampered by repression and restrictive legislation. They are now facing a terrifying situation of an upsurge in extremely violent conflict. The international trade union community is urging for a peaceful political approach in order to protect Iraqi workers and their families from sectarianism, discrimination and terror."

"The international community needs to dramatically step up its efforts to restore peace and push back against the horrendous dogma and methods of ISIS, which is trying to return the region to the middle ages. Those most at risk – women, children, migrants and workers in targeted occupations, must be protected," said Burrow.

The ITUC represents 176 million workers in 161 countries and territories and has 325 national affiliates.

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