



Int Dept/Keth Thapper/gp

DATE  
2011-06-20  
YOUR DATE

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Mr. Mahinda Rajapakshe, President  
President's House  
"Temple Tree"  
COLOMBO 3  
Sri Lanka

### **Violent repression of legitimate workers' protests leading to the death of a worker**

Mr. President,

The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), representing more than 1.5 million workers, hereby denounces in the strongest possible terms the violent repression of legitimate workers' protest actions, which have led to 270 workers being injured, of whom 60 seriously, and even the sad and untimely death of one 22 year old worker.

We have been informed by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) that on 8 April, the Sri Lankan Government presented its "Employees' Pension Benefit Fund Bill" in Parliament, and that this was contested by the Joint Trade Union Alliance (JTUA) which comprises 26 Sri Lankan trade union organisations. Protest actions were organised in the city of Colombo as well as in the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) of Katunayake. The workers wanted to make it clear that the "Employees' Pension Benefit Fund Bill" is unacceptable to them, as it would seriously curtail their retirement benefits. On 24 May, tens of thousands of workers took to the streets in Katunayake in a rally which was organised by the JTUA.

On 29 May, persons connected to the government started distributing false JTUA leaflets and posters in the Katunayake EPZ, in an attempt to misinform the workers and to try and convince them to support the Bill. This is even more remarkable given the fact that the police are known to have used environmental laws in the past to prohibit the distribution of union leaflets – which can of course never be the purpose of such legislation.

The following day, workers took to the streets to protest against these manipulative actions. Their demonstration was met with fierce police violence, including the use of automatic weapons against protesters. One 22 year old worker was killed in the shooting. Another 270 were injured, of whom 60 seriously. They are currently being treated in three hospitals:

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the Ragama Teaching Hospital, the Vijaya Kumaratunge Hospital in Seeduwa, and the Negombo District Hospital. The latter is currently treating seven of them who are in a critical condition.

Subsequently, the police started harassing and intimidating the workers, stopping them from leaving their factories, or assaulting them at factory exits after work. Female workers have been humiliated by male police officers, and a number of them were even beaten with iron rods.

After the situation threatened to escalate completely, the police handed over the security in the Katunayake EPZ to the military, meaning that the workers are now effectively deprived of their right to assemble, protest, and take collective trade union action.

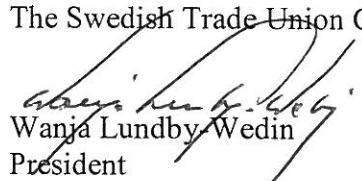
M. President,

The LO hereby adds its voice to that of the JTUA on behalf of thousands of Sri Lankan workers to urge you to take immediate measures in order to:

- ensure the withdrawal of the “Employees’ Pension Benefit Fund Bill”
- establish a full, independent and immediate investigation into the incidents surrounding the legitimate workers’ protest actions, with a special provision to investigate the behaviour of the police
- ensure compensation and job security to the victims of the excessive police violence
- render impossible this kind of police harassment in the future.

LO-Sweden strongly urges you to look into the abovementioned facts, as they compromise your country’s reputation among foreign investors. Organising workers’ protests is a basic trade union and therefore human right, which Sri Lanka is bound to respect by virtue of its ratification of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions 87 (on Freedom of Association) and 98 (on Collective Bargaining). It goes without saying that harassing, beating, shooting and, a fortiori, killing protesting workers, are all very serious violations of the principles and rights enshrined therein. We therefore trust that you will pay prompt attention to this very serious matter.

Yours sincerely,  
The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO)

  
Wanja Lundby-Wedin  
President