

#13

UNION VIEW

ITUC International Trade Union Confederation
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→ Reuters.



Swaziland: the repressive side of an absolute monarchy

The "subjects" of the Swazi monarchy are ravaged by poverty and AIDS. Amid a state of emergency that has lasted for 35 years, and under which political parties are banned, the trade unions are heading the fight for a multi-party democracy and greater social justice.

Report and firsthand accounts.

Swaziland's "picturesque" image conceals a tragic reality

Repression has been stepped up with the passing of the new anti-terrorism law.



The extravagant spending of the royal family and its entourage together with the overblown military budget stand in stark contrast to the dire under-funding of the health and education sectors. → Delayed Gratification

The four-lane highway linking Swaziland's capital Mbabane with the commercial city of Manzini cuts through some spectacular countryside, with rugged, rock-strewn peaks rising on either side of a lush green valley. Filled with bustling markets and air-conditioned shopping malls, both cities appear orderly, peaceful and relatively prosperous.

Scratch the surface, however, and it soon becomes clear that all is far from well in the Swazi kingdom.

This little country sandwiched between South Africa and Mozambique is ruled by one of the world's last absolute monarchies, a quasi-feudal system where political parties are outlawed and pro-democracy campaigners subject to systematic harassment.

Patronage and corruption are rife, and resources vital for health and education are diverted to sustaining the lavish lifestyle of King Mswati III, his 13 wives and their entourage. Beyond the cities, most of the just over 1 million Swazi citizens live on the land, many in abject rural poverty. Over 70 percent survive on less than two dollars a day, and a third survive on aid handouts. (see page 9)

Swaziland holds few world records, but tragically its rate of AIDS infection is second to none.

"Swaziland is a country that is a last absolute monarchy. It is a country that is a dictatorship. It is a country that has banned political parties and as a result deliberately does not

want checks and balances, and Swaziland is a country that has politicized culture and tradition to retain and sustain the feudal system currently in place," says Jan Sithole, general secretary of the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions.

With political parties driven underground, the labour unions play a prominent part in the democracy movement working alongside the churches, human rights groups, banned politicians and even on occasions the employers' organization to demand change. However, standing up for democracy can come at a price in Swaziland.

Although the authorities have carefully avoided the sort of violent crackdown on the opposition that has led to international condemnation and isolation for Zimbabwe, there is a pattern of coercion against dissents. Sithole himself was arrested twice last year. Striking textile workers and student demonstrators have been subjected to brutal police responses to peaceful protest. Opposition figures frequently face detention, police raids on their homes and threats of job losses, eviction or worse. Barnabas Sibusiso Dlamini, the king's handpicked prime minister, announced in early March that all civil servants belonging to political parties or other organizations opposed to the system of royal government would be rooted out and fired.

The level of oppression was cranked up in November, when the government began implementation of a new Suppression of Terrorism Act in response to an apparent attack on a

road bridge leading to the Royal Palace at Lozitha in which two alleged bombers were killed when a device exploded prematurely. The act gives police sweeping powers to hold suspects and carries the threat of 25 years in jail for anybody convicted of associating with organizations the government designates as terrorists – including the main opposition party, the People's United Democratic Movement, or PUDEMO.

Amnesty International has expressed "grave concern" about the act saying its provisions "are inherently repressive, breach Swaziland's obligations under international law and regional human rights law and are already leading to the violation of the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly."

Dlamini's government dismissed the human rights concerns and proceeded to use the law to lock up PUDEMO's President Mario Masuko, who remains in jail on terrorism and sedition charges.

In 2005, following political pressure spearheaded by the trade unions, King Mswati agree to introduce a new constitution, with a bill of rights. However, charters which came into force in 2006 drawn up by the kings advisors with minimal input from civil society proved to be a profound disappointment for the pro-democracy movement.

The constitution confirms the king as the supreme executive, legislative and judicial power. He appoints ministers, judges, two-thirds of the Senate and almost one-in-six members of the lower house of parliament. In addition the so-called Tinkhundla system of government, enshrined in the constitution, gives wide powers to royal advisors and traditional chiefs who are fiercely loyal to the monarch.

Parliamentary elections were held in September, 2008, but with parties banned, candidates could run only as individuals. Observers rejected the vote as falling short of international standards.

With such sweeping powers, Mswati and his clique are able to manipulate the national budget to suit their needs. The king owns most of the country's land "in trust for the nation", and his investment company Tibiyo Taka Ngwane has extensive business holdings ranging from the vast sugar plantations which produce Swaziland's biggest export, to hotels, shops and a national newspaper.

Last year, the king threw a party to celebrate his own 40th birthday and the country's 40 years of independence from Britain. Government officials put the cost at around 25 million emalangeni (US\$2.5 million), but the bill is widely believed to be at least five times higher. The purchase of a fleet of Germany luxury cars for the occasion and a birthday shopping spree by several of the King's wives to Dubai incensed public opinion.

In response to the government's authoritarian stance and lack of accountability, progressive forces have united in a number of organizations to push for change. Unions, churches and banned political parties work together in the Swaziland United Democratic Front, which is demanding negotiations with the authorities to replace the Tinkhundla system with a genuine democracy.

"We are a united front now; we speak with one voice to say that we need a multiparty democratic Swaziland," says PUDEMO's Secretary General Siphasha Dlamini.

"We want a constitutional, multiparty democracy that will

Time line

The Dlamini clan are believed to have led their followers from southern Mozambique in the mid-**18th century** to establish a powerful kingdom in what is now Swaziland. Today the King is always chosen from the Dlamini, and the prime minister he appoints invariably bears the same surname.

The kingdom was named for the **19th-century** king Mswati II. Faced with the growing might of the neighbouring Zulus, Swazi monarchs sought alliances with the emerging white powers in the region, and following the Anglo-Boer War, the British took control. Under the British protectorate, white settlers maintained a growing control over resources such as the iron-ore mines and sugar plantations, but the British allowed the king and his network of chiefs to keep considerable power over local affairs.

King Sobhuza II led the country to independence in **1968** backed by a political movement that took its inspiration from Swazi traditional structures. Sobhuza was content to rule under the Westminster-inspired constitution inherited from the British – so long as the royal party held all the seats in parliament. However, in **1973** an opposition group took 20 percent of the vote and Sobhuza launched a royal coup, suppressing parliament, banning all political parties and proclaiming and imposing personal rule by the monarch.

British rule had prevented Swaziland being absorbed by white-dominated South Africa, but the kingdom became economically dependent on its giant neighbour, particularly when the civil war in Mozambique cut off the only other access to the sea. In the early **1980s**, the government arrested and deported members of the African National Congress, and commandos sent by the apartheid regime were able to carry out deadly raids against ANC supporters in Swaziland.

Sobhuza had 70 wives and over 200 children, and his death in **1983** triggered a prolonged a power struggle until his teenage son Mswati III was recalled from school in England to take the throne.

deal with the separation of powers, because that is where Swaziland is sinking," she says. "With all the powers vested in the king, the way is open for corruption."

According to the constitution, the government is bound to introduce free primary school education this year, but Education Minister Wilson Ntsahngase announced in January that the target was being abandoned "owing to the dire shortage of teachers, schools, infrastructure and equipment."

That statement, just four months after the multimillion-dollar birthday jamboree, sparked widespread indignation.

"We are having these celebrations but we are having to forego a right like access to free education," said Khangezile Dlamini, general secretary of Council of Swaziland Churches. "We could use that money to improve the quality of education and do more on things that are going to benefit the nation, not just benefit an individual and his family."

The Council of Churches, which links the Roman Catholics,



Anglicans, Lutherans and other denominations, had planned a rally in Manzini on March 14 to demand free schooling, but police banned it at the last minute.

For many children, poverty has been compounded by the death of parents in the AIDS epidemic, which has hit Swaziland harder than any other country. International aid efforts have made antiretroviral drugs widely available, helping to improve and prolong the lives of HIV sufferers, but poor nutrition and the scarcity of clinics compounds the problem.

Despite information campaigns the virus continues to spread at alarming rates due to a variety of social and cultural factors. Campaigners say polygamy practiced by the king and many men in rural areas sets the wrong example and encourages promiscuity. The trade unions have run information campaigns to inform members of the dangers of AIDS and reduce discrimination against HIV-positive workers.

"We are dealing with a disaster here," says Sithole, the STFU leader.

Many Swazis are deeply frustrated that their country's plight gets so little international attention.

They feel the royal authorities have succeeded in presenting the country as a "quaint" anomaly where ancient practices – symbolised by the Umhlanga festival where tens of thousands of bare-breasted maidens dance before the king – co-exist peacefully with an indigenous version of democracy.

But unless pressure is brought to bear to bring about a real change, many fear the situation will could get much worse.

"Let the world help us now. The world must not let it reach the stage of Zimbabwe," says Dr. A.T. Dlamini, president of the NNLC, a banned opposition party. "We've seen [this] in African with the post-colonial leaders. They start out as dictators and end up as murderers. Many people will say that we are not suffering, but why do we have to reach that stage."

Subtle repression based on fear

The pro-democratic movement is calling for outside pressure.

Swaziland's royal-appointed political leadership is cautious. Rather than employing the heavy hand of violent oppression which has earned the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe international condemnation and isolation, the ruling clique prefers more subtle measures to silence the voices of political opposition.

Activists are hauled in and held in detention for days then released without charge, meetings are banned or broken up by the police with beatings rather than shootings, government critics complain they are denied promotions, their children refused scholarships, passports are withheld and families are threatened with eviction from their ancestral land.

The coercion is rarely of a level to attract international headlines, but the persistent harassment risks sapping the spirit of the beleaguered pro-democracy movement.

Swaziland had boasted it had no political prisoners. That changed when Mario Masuku, leader of the banned People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO), was jailed in November under the Suppression of Terrorism Act introduced by the government last year following an explosion at a road bridge near the king's palace that killed two alleged bombers.

"This government, they adopted a smart way, a quiet movement. The idea is to make everybody else other than the Jan Sitholes and the Marios, to make everybody else who is not going to be so courageous, keep sitting where they are. And I think that is working very well for them," says human rights lawyer Thulani Maseko, who is representing Masuku.

"What the government is doing is to ensure that the environment of hostility is alive and people always think about 'what's going to happen to me.' And it's working for them ... the world is led to believe there is peace and quiet in Swaziland."

Political parties are banned in Swaziland. Although elections were held in September, candidates could only run as individuals. Ten members of the 65-seat National Assembly



"What the government is doing is to ensure that the environment of hostility is alive and people always think about 'what's going to happen to me.' And it's working for them ... the world is led to believe there is peace and quiet in Swaziland." Thulani Maseko, human rights lawyer who is representing Masuku. →Paul Ames

and 20 of the 30 senators are appointed by the king along with the prime minister and the rest of the government. Royal powers are further enforced by the powers of the king's advisors and traditional chiefs, who wield authority in rural areas through the so-called Tinkhundla system of local government.

Arrested on terrorism and sedition charges

King Mswati's father Sobhuza installed the royal dictatorship in 1973 after an opposition party made modest gains in parliamentary elections. Hopes that the introduction of a new constitution would bring democracy were dashed in 2006, when authorities refused to consult with progressive forces and instead produced a charter which cemented royal rule through the Tinkhundla system. Parties remain banned, elections held in September were denounced as a sham and,



The pressure for democracy in Swaziland was always coming from the trade union movement, because these have been the pioneers", says Musa Hlohpe coordinator of the coalition.



→Paul Ames

in October, the king appointed hard-line royalist Barnabas Sibusiso Dlamini as prime minister.

Reformists who remembered Dlamini's strong-arm tactics during a previous stint in power were dismayed.

"We are bracing ourselves for hard times," Masuku said at the time. Within a month he was arrested on terrorism and sedition charges.

Masuku, who is in his late 50s and suffers from diabetes, was at first allowed visits only from his close family. The authorities later relented and allowed greater access, but his lawyer says he is still not getting the correct diet for a man with his condition, is prevented from seeing his own doctor and denied privacy in meetings with his legal council.

The authorities have suggested Masuku could be released on bail, but he has refused to apply until a date is set for a trial. His lawyer believes the government is embarrassed by the attention caused by Masuku's continued detention and concerned it cannot secure a conviction in court, and that it therefore would like to release him and let the case quietly drop, while imposing strict bail conditions that would restrict his political activity.

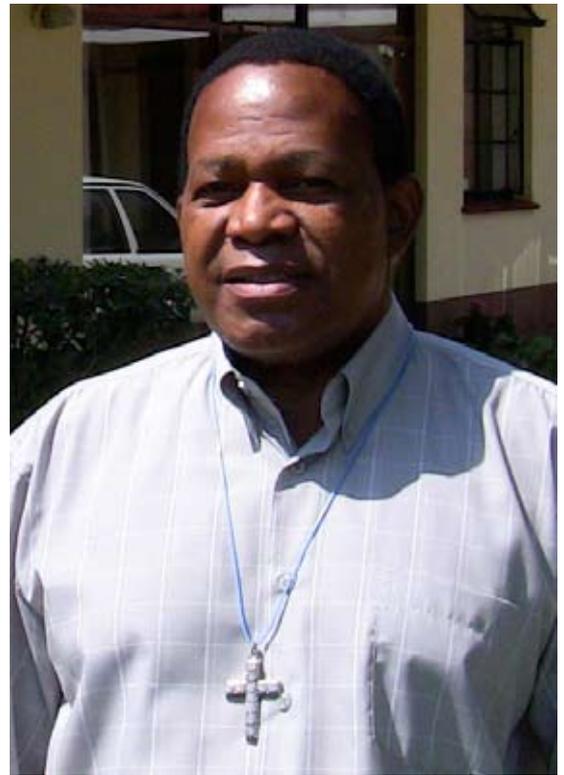
"We're not going to rush to apply for bail; let's see what game the state is playing," Maseko says. "In a democratic state, which claims to be under the constitution, such laws should not be allowed to exist because they undermine free expression . . . they are not sure they can secure conviction."

Progressive forces come together to resist

In the face of the government clampdown, progressive forces come together to resist. Trade unions, political parties and churches formed the Swaziland United Democratic Front, modelled on the UDF, which spearheaded the fight against apartheid in South Africa. An even wider selection of civil society makes up the Coalition of Concerned Civil Organizations set up after the government evicted two chiefs and hundreds of their subjects in order to give their land to one



"There is an opportunity, but that will depend on what support we get from the outside", PUDEMO's Secretary General Sphasha Dlamini. → Paul Ames



"This is a very small and vulnerable economy . . . the strongest weapon is isolation and economic pressure," Meshack Mabuza, Anglican Bishop of Swaziland. → Paul Ames

of the king's brothers. The eviction was carried out despite a ruling against it from the Supreme Court.

"The pressure for democracy in Swaziland was always coming from the trade union movement, because these have been the pioneers," says Musa Hlohe, coordinator of the coalition. "After this crisis there was a total breakdown of the rule of law, so people rallied round and formed a broader coalition."

Although the pro-democracy movement enjoys broad-based support, many Swazis believe they need more outside help to force the royal establishment to accept reform. The Congress of South African Trade Union's (COSATU) has taken a lead by occasional blockades of the border crossings on which the Swazi economy depends, but Swazis complain their little country is ignored by the wider international community.

"There is an opportunity, but that will depend on what support we get from the outside," says PUDEMO's Secretary General Sphasha Dlamini. "We know really that Europe has nothing to lose nor to gain from Swaziland but . . . we are still a country and a people; they shouldn't look in terms of Swaziland being too small. Our population is only a million, but even if we were only 20 people, we belong to the globe."

Many believe outside pressure could quickly force the Swazi establishment to accept change.

Call for isolation and economic pressure

"This is a very small and vulnerable economy . . . the strongest weapon is isolation and economic pressure," says the Anglican Bishop of Swaziland Meshack Mabuza. "I don't see it lasting even for a month with pressure from the outside economically, so let us rejoice and pray that this pressure will increase."

Tradition taken hostage

Swazis are a proudly independent people. They are fiercely defensive of ancient customs based around the royal family, like the regiments of warriors sworn to defend the king.

Even among the most radical opposition activists, it's hard to find any voices calling for a removal of the monarch or a scrapping of those cherished traditions. Instead, the opposition wants to democratize the system and introduce a constitutional monarchy.

However, the king and his ministers are using the nation's deep attachment to the monarchy and royal traditions to stifle opposition, accusing the opposition of being un-Swazi by seeking to introduce multiparty democracy into the system.

"When you speak like this and you are a Swazi and an African, you are considered to be unpatriotic and un-African; you are labelled a supporter of Western imperialism," says Musa Hlophe, coordinator of Swaziland Coalition of Concerned Civic Organizations.

"Am I to understand that oppression of an African by an African is better than oppression of an African by a Western white? To me oppression is just oppression," adds Hlophe, whose civil rights group was set up after the royal government evicted two traditional chiefs and hundreds of followers in order to install the king's bother on their land in 2002.

One man with an insiders' view of how the Swazi authorities abuse the country's traditions is Mfomfo Nkhambule, a former minister and confidant of the king who turned dissident, founding the Inhlava Forum opposition party and writing a regular critical column in the Times of Swaziland.

Nkhambule is even related by marriage to King Mswati and was a royal appointee to the parliament in 1998. He was also a staunch member of one of the warrior regiments which from the earliest days of Swazi history were formed to protect the king and which now fulfil an important ceremonial role, turning out on special occasions in their extravagant fur and feather regalia.

However, a spell studying in Britain gave Nkhambule a taste for the cut and thrust of Westminster politics, which he tried to bring into the Swazi parliament. After a number of battles with the prime minister, he was squeezed out of the cabinet and is now being hounded by the authorities because of his reformist stance.

After receiving "friendly advice" that his newspaper articles could lead to arrest on sedition charges, he was summoned to the palace in January by leaders of the traditional regiments and told to make a choice.

"They said 'you have decided to get involved in politics without the king's blessing, you continue to write about the king as if he were nobody, so now you have got to choose: is it politics or do you still wish to remain a member of the traditional warriors?' " Nkhambule recalls.

"This was too much... Where do they get the guts to tell me



→ Delayed Gratification

to shed part of my national identity? They cannot say that to any Swazi," he argues. "Being silent and stupid you are seen being very loyal, and that is not how I would define loyalty to my king."

In late March, the Balondolozhi regiment carried out the threat to expel him. There could be worse to come. Nkhambule has been summoned by his chief, a member of the king's inner circle, and told to hand over several head of cattle to the king by way of apology for his articles. Nkhambule fears the next step could be an attempt to expel his family from their land.

"Eviction means you are now evicted from an area that is history for you and they dump you anywhere," he says. "I'm really disturbed about this... my father is quite old, and he doesn't have the strength to be putting up a new homestead."

In rural Swaziland, local chiefs wield far reaching powers, backed by so-called "community police". Democracy campaigners complain that chiefs regularly ban political meetings and intimidate dissidents by refusing to grant approval for travel document or scholarships.

Government opponents also accuse the monarchy of manipulating the great traditional festivals of Incwala, where the warriors gather, and Umhlanga, the eight-day pageant famed for its thousands of dancing girls in traditional dress. The meaty banquets offered to poor citizens during the festivals is seen by the opposition as a way of buying the support of Swazis who spend the rest of the year in dire poverty.

"The king and the traditionalists, their power is derived from making people hungry, poor, so then they can feel they owe their livelihood to them (when) there are handouts," says Dr. A.T.Dlamini, president of the opposition Ngwane National Liberatory Congress (NNLC).

"Yes, Swazis believe in their culture, but the numbers that you see (at traditional festivities) are not there because the people are happy; it's because they are forced by circumstances, either intimidation at home or the bribery – if they come, they will eat well."

A storm over a tea cup changed the course of Swaziland's trade union history

The two trade union federations SFTU and SFL are at the fore of the coalition of civic organisations fighting for a multi-party democracy.

Back in the 1980s, when landlocked Swaziland was an economic dependency of apartheid South Africa, a young Jan Sithole was a shift operator on high pressure boilers and turbines at a paper plant.

He was increasingly revolted by the treatment of the Swazi workforce by the white South African management, and particularly infuriated by the arrogance of one engineer who demanded that skilled workers on his shift interrupt their work to make his tea.

One day, Sithole told the engineer this was going to stop and he had to brew his own. In the ensuing dispute, Sithole explains, he downed tools, prompting a ham-fisted attempt by the

engineer to work the turbines, which resulted in flooding and a forced shut-down of production.

Management was called, and Sithole eventually got the machinery working again. However, he faced a disciplinary inquiry, but in a ruling that broke ground at the time, Sithole was vindicated and the blame placed squarely on the shoulders of the white engineer.

Sithole became a hero for the Swazi workforce and went on to become leader of the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU), ensuring its role in the forefront of actions confronting the Swazi royal authorities both to defend workers' rights and



Vincent Ncongwane, secretary general of the Swaziland Federation of Labour

"For us as trade unions, we believe that political parties have a role to play in any meaningful space in any country and we're also in the situation where, in Swaziland, there really is no meaningful opposition to the current regime, so we have that major challenge."

We as unions cannot shy away from the political issues because without any opposition, with no control over the way our monies are spent, there is no one to call government to order."

"Only last year (2008) there was what is normally called the 40/40 celebrations where the country was celebrating its 40th anniversary of independence from Britain and His Majesty the King was celebrating his 40th birthday. The amount that was spent for a country that claims to be poor - we find that quite embarrassing."

"They spent a whole load of money on buying BMWs and totally useless Porsche cars when we've got no need for them. Let me say, conservatively, over 65 per cent of our people live below the poverty line. Over a third of our people are on food aid, and yet millions were spent on an event that did not last more than three days."

"This year, there was supposed to be free primary education. The minister of education came out in a very mocking manner, a rude manner I should say, to indicate why that cannot be so. He pleaded government poverty, quite forgetting that not more than six months back, there was this lavish celebration. In the civil service they want to have yes men and yes women, and for

us that means corruption is going to be having a field day in that sort of situation. We are saying that we are going to oppose such short sightedness."

"We have not been having meaningful foreign direct investment, so that is going to result in a chaotic situation. Never mind the fact that even before this wave of retrenchment, we were already facing high levels of unemployment and dire poverty of the masses."

Read the full interview of Vincent Ncongwane, entitled: "In the absence of [political] opposition [to the government], we as unions cannot shy away from political issues" available at: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article3584&lang=en>



"We are working towards creating an inter-union coordination council... and the government's attitude is helping to unite us." → Paul Ames



bring democratic change to one of the world's last absolute monarchies.

"He's frank, he says the truth, a very brave man," says Bishop Louis Ncamiso Ndlova, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Manzini who has led churchgoers in pro-democracy marches alongside union leaders.

"Sometimes I say to him, 'Jan, you know I'm getting tired,' and he says 'you mustn't get tired, you must keep trying, trying, trying.'"

Swaziland has two trade union federations following a split in the early 1990s, which saw formation of the Swaziland Federation of Labour (SFL), mainly among white collar workers. In the face of continuing government intransigence, the two groups are now working closely together in the vanguard of a broad coalition of forces seeking to introduce a multiparty system.

"The attitude of government has helped to bring us together," says Vincent Ncongwane, secretary general of the SFL. Only by working together can the unions and other progressive forces get their message across to the royal authorities, he says. "That is one of the prime movers in us coming together."

Jan Sithole, general secretary of the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions



Arrested on two occasions last year, Jan Sithole (SFTU) denounced the new law, "The chief aim of which is to silence dissent". →Paul Ames

"We also have a situation where there is dire poverty in the country; this is exhibited by the fact that about 70 percent of our population live below the poverty line, which is about 2 dollars a day, and about 33 percent of the population is dependent on donor food aid food."

"There is a skewed distribution of wealth: the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer."

"With the wealth we that we are creating, if it were equally distributed, we would not be experiencing the level of poverty that we are seeing."

"We still are run in a feudal system that has one of the last absolute monarchies, and a regime that is very dictatorial and a country that is managed with impunity."

"The (suppression of terrorism) law, as it stands, its

core business is to silence the voices of dissent and all those that criticise this system of governance currently in place."

"We unfortunately hold a very negative gold medal where we have the highest rate of HIV infection in the whole world in terms of prevalence."

"The government, by what we see in their budget, they don't regard HIV/AIDS as a priority ... the budget towards health and agriculture is far lower than the budget that goes to the military and the armed forces, though we are fighting no war and we are not threatened by any of our neighbours. This is prevalent budgeting for most dictatorships."

Read the full interview of Jan Sithole, entitled: "The law as it stands – its core business is to silence the voices of dissent and all those that criticise this system of governance." available at: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article3587&lang=en>

Together with the Swaziland National Association of Teachers, the SFL and SFTU agreed in March to set up a Labour Coordinating Council with a joint national executive committee and secretariat to further bind them together.

"In unity lies our strength and in solidarity rests our power," says the memorandum of agreement signed by the leaders of the three organizations.

The unions are also working with churches, banned political parties, NGOs, human rights groups and even, on occasion, the employers' federation in a broad coalition to demand change.

"Their values are to achieve a multiparty Swaziland through a negotiated settlement, and they believe that political parties can co-exist with the monarchy, as long as the monarchy is a constitutional monarch that is not above the law," says Sithole, during an interview at the SFTU headquarters in Manzini, the country's commercial hub.

Although Swaziland has banned political parties, the law does allow for labour to organize and form unions. The country has ratified all eight International Labour Organization conventions, and the workers have legal rights to collective bargaining and strikes.

Restrictions on trade union rights

However, there are restrictions – unions must represent 50 percent of employees in a work place to be automatically recognized; if not recognition depends on the employer. Procedures for announcing a strike can last up to 74 days, and voting procedures on strike action are complex, making legal strikes virtually impossible to organize.

There is legal redress at an Industrial Court, which is generally viewed as effective and impartial by unions and employers, although union officials have more complaints about the workings of the Industrial Court of Appeal, which has overturned rulings of the lower court which favoured the unions.

In some areas, the unions enjoy good relations with the Federation of Swaziland Employers, although that organization's board recently decided to leave the Coalition of Concerned Civic Organizations, a group set up to promote the rule of law which also included the unions, because it had decided the coalition had become too political.

Repression in the textile sector

Union complaints are more often directed against conditions of workers employed by the foreign companies, mainly from Taiwan, who have set up textile and clothing factories employing a mostly female workforce in the industrial town of Matsapha.

In March 2008 police intervened against thousands of textile workers engaged in a legal strike and several strikers – mostly women – were injured. Similar tactics were used by workers who attempted to block the border with South Africa to demonstrate for political reform in September.

Violence and detention

"Because of the immunity and protection that the Chinese industries, the textile industries, enjoy from the political support of the country, they simply discharged the armed forces to put pressure on the women to go back to work," says Sithole. "And they refused unless there were responses, that their demands were adhered to, and a lot of those women became victims of rubber bullets, tear gas, of being beaten by batons – all for having offended nobody, but simply for demanding decent wages."

Union leaders also face the threat of violence or police detention. Ten senior officials were arrested in September ahead of the parliamentary elections, and Sithole was hauled in for questioning twice last year. In 1995 he was abducted and bundled into the boot of a car, which was abandoned in the countryside leaving him captive for several hours before he was discovered by a passer-by.

The SFTU is the largest federation, with around 65,000 members, 38 percent of which are women. The SFL has about 20,000 members, mostly in the finance, retail and manufacturing sector. About 80 percent of the formal private sector is unionized, although union membership has been hit by recent retrenchment and the growth of contract labour in key industries.

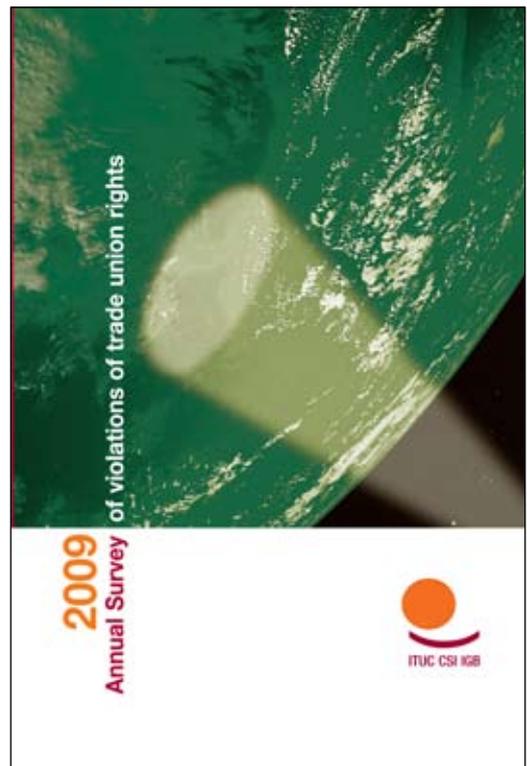
ITUC Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights

This year's ITUC Annual Survey (*) details the numerous trade union rights violations seen in Swaziland during 2008. The report denounces, for example, the brutal police suppression of a textile workers' strike in the industrial zone of Manzini. The ITUC also censures the repeated arrests, for all too many years, of trade union leaders.

On two occasions in 2008, the ITUC protested directly to the Prime Minister of Swaziland following the successive arrests of the SFTU general secretary, Jan Sithole. The ITUC also called on the International Labour Organisation to engage with the Swazi authorities regarding this matter.

N.D.

(*) More information in the chapter on Swaziland in the ITUC Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights around the world : www.ituc-csi.org



The ravages of HIV/AIDS, aggravated by poverty

The unions condemn the government's inertia and are rallying to step up information campaigns.

Sibusiso is one of those statistics. AIDS has left him looking less than half his 14 years, and his skin is pockmarked by the scars left by opportunistic infections. He is, however, much improved, says the woman who brought him that bike.

"It will need some time, the healing of the skin, but he's gained weight, he's playing with other kids, he even smiles," explains Tengetile Hlophe, project manager at the aid group SWAPOL. "Last year he was very sick. In December he had sores everywhere. Last year he would not talk to anyone."

Sibusiso's progress is due to the antiretroviral drugs which SWAPOL – Swaziland for Positive Living – provided along with the bike, and the regular attention he gets including weekly visits and food parcels from a mobile clinic and monthly trips to hospital in the capital Mbabane, long from the isolated homestead in the heart of the country.

Founded in 2001 by five women who themselves had tested positive for HIV, SWAPOL is now one of the most active NGOs supporting AIDS and HIV sufferers in the country. Its activities range from education campaigns, running communal gardens to grow food for impoverished families, distributing condoms, legal support to prevent land grabs of deceased families' land to organizing demonstrations against the foreign shopping expeditions of the king's free-spending wives at a time when the royal-appointed government is failing to meet its own targets for health spending.

There are many reasons why AIDS is so rampant in Swaziland. Many people point to the polygamy practiced by the royal family and many rural men as encouraging promiscuity rather than stable, single-partner relationship.

"The people here in Swaziland can take as many wives as they like," complains Bishop Louis Ncamiso Ndlova, the country's top Roman Catholic clergyman. "We struggle with this ourselves as churches, because we preach marriage –

that you must marry one wife – but some of our Christians take two wives and they say they are Swazis."

Drivers of the "kombi" minibuses, which are the backbone of the public transport, say they risk scorn from their colleagues unless they maintain a network of at least five lovers, the *Times of Swaziland* reported recently.

Hlophe says rural polygamy also has a direct impact on the spread of AIDS. "You find the men having five wives; they can't satisfy all those five wives so they all get boyfriends, from outside, and the boyfriend has his own girlfriend so it becomes a vicious circle."

Opposition politicians and the trade unions say recent labour practices have made the problem worse. The opening of a string of textile factories by Taiwanese investors in the industrial town of Matsapha has seen an influx of poorly paid young women moving in from the countryside to live in communal housing near their work.

"There is a class of informal housing for the workers in the textile industry, which is very poor and which promotes promiscuity in the face of HIV," cautions A.T. Dlamini, president of the opposition Ngwane National Liberatory Congress (NNLC) "The workers are paid very little in terms of salary, they are 90 percent female and they are put in there from all over the country with no recognizable identity, and because of low wages they are susceptible to sexual advances for extra cash. Young women are coming there to work, and they get sexual pressures because someone is offering money."

The trade unions run their own information and education campaigns to inform their members of the realities of AIDS, but shop stewards complain that workers are too tired after hard shifts to listen and attend awareness classes. The unions have also negotiated agreement with employers to protect workers with HIV/AIDS from discrimination in the workplace. However, union leaders acknowledge that they need to give greater attention to the problem.

"I must admit that my federation unfortunately has not been very involved in that," admits Vincent Ncongwane, secretary general of the Swaziland Federation of Labour (SFL). "Unfortunately this is an issue of planning. We have been in the planning mode ever since, but it is something that must be taken at full steam during the course of this year because as we sit around and kick our heels, we are losing members."

In the Swazi countryside, AIDS and rural poverty have joined to make a vicious circle. The death of so many active young adults has left fewer and fewer people to grow food,

According to the World Health Organization, almost 200,000 of Swaziland's population of just over one million are infected with HIV. The adult infection rate is 26 percent; the World's highest. Latest tests on pregnant women show 42 percent are HIV positive. Life expectancy has dropped by almost half in a decade and by some estimates is less than 40. AIDS has killed more than 10,000 Swazis every year since 2002. At least 60,000 children have been orphaned by AIDS, and up to 17,000 kids below 14 are living with HIV.



In his grandmother's isolated farm, "Sibusiso is starting to regain some strength", rejoices Tengetile Hlophe (on the right), project leader of the SWAPOL (Swaziland for Positive living) support group. → Paul Arnes



→ Delayed Gratification

leading to undernourishment, which hinders the prospects of a healthy existence for those living with AIDS, even if they have access to antiretroviral treatment.

The unions are also demanding that the government do more by investing in health and measures to alleviate rural poverty rather than spending on the royal family and armed forces.

"They don't regard HIV/AIDS as a priority," says Jan Sithole, general secretary of the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU). "The budget for health and agriculture is far lower than the budget that goes to the military and the armed forces whilst we are fighting no war and we are not threatened by any of our neighbours. This is prevalent budgeting style for most dictatorships."

It is Swaziland's women who are worst affected by the AIDS epidemic. Wives are often forced to hide their HIV-positive status for fear of angering their husbands. Commercial sex workers often agree to unprotected sex because their clients pay more if they don't use a condom. In a society where men hold the purse strings, poor women are afraid to ask for money for treatment or transport to a clinic.

"Most of the time women lie," says Hlophe. "They come back home and they hide the ARVs, so they continue sleeping with the man without a condom, because you can't talk about HIV at home. Once you start talking about it there'll be an issue of domestic violence. The husband will start beating the wife, saying 'where did you get it, because I don't have it,' because he is not yet sick."

Another factor aiding the spread of AIDS is the widespread reliance on traditional healers known as inyanga. "Some of these people have the AIDS-related illnesses, but they don't go to the hospital, they go the traditional healers, they are given the traditional concoctions, they come and use them

at home. While using these things, they continue sleeping with other people and they continue spreading HIV in the process," Hlophe says.

Even one recent initiative taken to reduce the risk of HIV transmission has backfired on Swazi women. Swaziland has pioneered the encouragement of circumcision as a way of protecting men from contracting HIV through sex with infected women. Several studies show that circumcision reduces the risk for men, but campaigners say the rush by Swazi men to have the operation had simply encouraged them to continue with promiscuous, unprotected sex.

"There is a hype," insists Hlophe. "This circumcision thing only benefits the man, but to me as a woman it adds to my disadvantages and challenges. There is this claim that when you are circumcised you have a less risk of getting infected, they take it that now they are circumcised they are not going to be infected, so they sleep with everyone."

Speaking to Sibusiso's grandmother as she sits on a reed mat in the shade of her mud-and-thatch hut, it's hard to understand that such attitudes persist two decades into southern Africa's AIDS crisis.

Gogo Mamba has watched all seven of her children die, two in infancy and the rest – three boys and two girls – claimed by AIDS, leaving her with the two grandchildren. "They don't give me too much trouble," she says with a smile. All I need to do is to make the fire and cook food for them, they even help with gathering the firewood."

Thankfully, Sibusiso's sister is HIV-negative and able to make the hour long walk through the bush to the nearest school. Sibusiso hopes that next year he'll be fit enough to go too. His more immediate concern, thanks to the drugs which keep him well, is finding a pump to put some air in the tyres of his bike.

UNICEF estimates 16 percent of Swazi children are missing out on school because of poverty and AIDS.

Schooling rates decline, driven by poverty and AIDS

The trade unions are fighting for free education and censure the discrimination faced by teacher activists.

Swaziland's constitution states that free primary level education will be available for all children from 2009.

However, after last year's extravagant celebrations to mark both the 40th anniversary of independence from Britain and King Mswati's 40th birthday, the government claims the state is broke, so parents will still have to pay to send their kids to school.

Drive along Swaziland's roads on a weekday morning and the pavements are filled with smiling students walking to classes in their spick-and-span uniform ties and sweaters. They are the lucky ones. Teachers' union leaders estimate 38,000 children are missing school.

"Children and parents have lost their constitutional right," says Simon Makhanya, president of the Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT). "It's very strange in our view that the supreme law of the land can be violated by government."

The authorities' plea of poverty in announcing their failure rang hollow given that they had just spent millions on the combined royal birthday and independence festivities, which

included a much reported inter-continental shopping trip for some of the king's many wives.

"We can say that the expenditure patterns of our government are very questionable, in that we do celebrate some of the things and we fund some of the things which we citizens think should not have been priorities, because if you are shaping up for developing a nation, you must invest in education," Makhanya says at the union's offices on the outskirts of Manzini, Swaziland's main commercial city.

SNAT says annual school fees can vary from 15,000 emalangeni (US\$1,500) to j 900 emalangeni (US\$90). Even the lowest levels are beyond the reach of many families living in poverty-stricken rural areas. "If people cannot afford food, what about money to take their kids to school?" asks SNAT Secretary General Muzi Mhlanga.

"Even if they have raised the money to pay the school fees, they have a problem buying uniforms and a problem getting something to eat," Mhlanga adds. "They come to school hungry and they can't concentrate, so the teachers – sometimes we have to provide the food if we can."

"Children and parents have lost their constitutional right to free primary education," condemns Simon Makhanya, president of the Swaziland National Association of Teachers (SNAT), at the centre of the photo, to the left of its general secretary, Muza Mhlanga. →Paul Ames





→ Delayed Gratification

The problem is compounded by the relentless spread of AIDS, which has devastated a generation of Swazis since the 1980s. UNICEF estimates there are 100,000 orphans in this nation of just over one million. More and more kids are forced to stay at home either because they are too sick to make the journey to class or because the loss of the parents means they have to care for younger brothers or sisters.

"Some of these children are now heading homesteads because there is no one. All the parents have died," says Mhlanga.

"The students are absent because they have to go to hospital. They are absent because they are taking care of a sick relative. So it's a vicious circle ... we are campaigning for free education, because we think free education would solve all these problems."

In its defence, the government points to grants to provide free school books or send orphans and other vulnerable children to school, but the union says those efforts are woefully inadequate.

"They are saying they are doing what they can, but when you look at the extravagance that you see around in terms of spending for celebrations, and now the ministers are demanding new cars: all of them are – expensive German-made vehicles. The priorities are not what they should be," Mhlanga complains.

For those that can afford it, Swazi schools had a good reputation. Non-white South Africans used to send their children to Swaziland to get an education denied them under the apartheid regime. Even today, its literacy rates are among the highest in African nations, but SNAT warns standards are moving in the wrong direction.

"In Swaziland, education used to be a priority. Education was better in the past, but now it's going down," says Mhlanga. "People used to come to Swaziland to get education, like South Africans, but now we are taking our children to South Africa, because we have fallen back in terms of quality of education."

It's not just students who are leaving. Increasingly teachers and other professionals are leaving for South Africa, in part to seek higher wages, but also because political pressures. The prime minister's threat in March to use the Special Branch to root out public employees who are members of the banned political parties has sent shock waves through the profession.

Sphasha Dlamini is secretary general of PUDEMO (the People's United Democratic Movement), principal of a rural high school, and a mother seeking to pay her child's way through university. "My job is threatened by the premier as we speak," says Dlamini, a former teacher's union leader. "If I lose this job, what will happen to my child?"

Even before the prime minister's threat, teachers complained of discrimination against pro-democracy activists within the education system. Critical educators are denied promotions, and the children of dissidents denied scholarships."

"Once it is known that you want a multiparty democracy in Swaziland, then your chances of your child getting a scholarship are next to nothing," says Mhlanga.

"When you are filling in the forms for the scholarship, you have to go to your village, where the chief has to endorse that you are a good citizen, so in Swaziland, if you are critical of the government, the chief will not sign."

Concern at the Bhunya pulp mill

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UNION
VIEW

May 2009 • 14

Faced with a hostile management, the union fears for jobs and wages.

Shop stewards at the pulp mill in Bhunya are worried. Over the past few years, they have seen the unionized workforce reduced from 1,400 to 420. Over the same period, the number of non-unionized contract workers working in the mill and the forests that supply it has grown to 1,800.

Now, with the economic downturn hitting the world paper market hard, the union is fearful that Sappi, the Johannesburg-based multinational that owns the plant, is considering more drastic action.

"Right now Sappi is on the verge of a crisis. In fact they are in the crisis to the extent that they have halted some operations; they have mentioned that to us – that we may not be paid for the coming month. They have mentioned the possibility of a closure," says Archie Sayed, union secretary at the plant. "Some contractors have been laid off. It's time for our wage negotiations, and they have told us quite blatantly that wage negotiations will not take place until October."

Meeting in the training centre on the edge of the plant's jumble of pipes and chimneys and conveyer belts that rises out of the verdant Swazi countryside, Sayed says the management is cranking up pressure on the workers.

"They are insisting that the union should assist in restructuring the company, in terms of a wage freeze and in terms of many other cost-cuttings that they believe could assist the company," he says. "There is imminent disaster, and we don't know if we will still be existing."

Those worries at one of Swaziland's biggest industrial concerns are reflected across the country's economy, as hopes fade that southern Africa could be protected from the global downturn by the traditionally cautious approach of the region's banks.

"With the current global financial crisis, we have already begun to feel the heat, much against what African governments say, because their banking systems were conservative; therefore, Africa is not as exposed to this challenge as European countries and Americans are," says SFTU leader Jan Sithole.

"The truth is, because our markets are in those countries and there is currently apathy in the banks loaning out money to the companies, there are a lot of retrenchments taking place, even abroad, and that has caused less demand for the goods that we produce and therefore a call for downsizing and retrenchments of workers in most of our industries, and some are likely to either see a wage freeze or massive retrenchments taking place," adds Sithole, who started his union activity at the Bhunya plant.

The key sugar industry, which accounts for 18 percent of national output and employs over one-third of all agricultural workers in Swaziland, has also seen thousands of job losses, with more feared as the European Union prepares to cut preferential prices to comply with World Trade Organization rules.



The trade union delegation reports ever-greater pressure on workers at the mill in Bhunya. →Paul Ames

Sayed is proud of the role played by workers in the pulp plant in pushing for better labour rights and in the wider democracy movement.

"The government says this is the nest of Satan, the devil himself," he jokes. "We are a major contributor to the trade unions in the country, the political progressiveness ... we support change and we believe it's long overdue. When it comes to protest actions, we are always first on the bus."

However, Sayed acknowledges the reduction of the workforce and the loss in union dues that entails have left the union weakened.

"The employers now believe that they have the upper hand, to the extent that they are now challenging everything we are doing," he says. "The company is extremely hostile to us as a trade union, such that we are compelled to be utilizing our very little revenue on dispute resolution."

Sayed points to cuts in medical support, the end of free transport to and from work and a "high increase in terms of cases where the company has used disciplinary measures to enforce their culture." The union recently took legal action against a management decision to introduce random alcohol testing. Although the Industrial Court found in the union's favour, the decision was overturned on appeal. Sayed now fears the union could be forced to pay up to 120,000 emalangeni (US\$12,000) in legal costs. "That may kill us," he warns.

The scourge of AIDS has also gripped the mill's workforce with 29 percent estimated to be infected. Although management has provided a centre for treatment and counselling, Sayed says more help is needed.

"We do believe that we need more education and training. The company is not doing much," Sayed says, adding that contract workers are often too tired coming off shifts to attend peer classes on the AIDS risks.

Workers at the plant are relatively well paid compared to many Swazis and many, particular contract workers, live in compounds far from home. The risk of HIV spreading through casual relationships is high.

Overall, Swaziland's unemployment is running at over 40 percent.

The textile sector: valuable jobs, but rights violated

In 2008, one of the biggest strikes in the country's history was brutally suppressed.



The global economic slowdown has also raised fears over the plight of the textile industry in the months to come. →Paul Ames



Assault is also common as a way of discipline in the shop, Jan Sithole, general secretary of the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions.



While the People's Republic of China has pumped investment into countries across Africa in recent years, Swaziland remains one of a handful of nations which has maintained allegiance to Taiwan.

In return for diplomatic support, Taiwan has a high profile development programme in Swaziland, and Taiwanese businesses have set up a string of factories, mostly producing textiles and clothing in the Matsapha industrial zone near the country's international airport. The investment was spurred by the African Growth and Opportunity Act approved by the U.S. Congress in 2000, which opened the American market to African textiles.

Double-edged investments

Many Swazis view the Taiwanese investment as a mixed blessing. Although it has brought much needed employment, trade unions denounce the working conditions for the mostly female workers.

"Not only are labour rights being violated, but also basic human rights," says Jan Sithole, general secretary of the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions. "Assault is also common as a way of discipline in the shop floor."

In March 2008, the textile workers voted overwhelmingly to call one of the country's biggest strikes in years to demand better wages and conditions.

Sixteen-thousand mostly women workers joined the strike.

With the authorities worried about the impact on a key export earner, police responded to protesting strikers with tear gas, rubber bullets and baton charges. Over a dozen workers were injured. Faced with the level of violence, the Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied Workers Union (SMAWU) suspended the strike, although in later negotiations they managed to achieve one of the key aims of the stoppage: a wage increase of around 15 percent. Talks are continuing in order to secure more concessions on housing and transport for the workforce.

Unfair dismissals

Despite the return to work, hundreds of workers lost their jobs after the strike in response, the companies say, to a downturn in world markets. The union says some of the layoffs were illegal and has launched legal challenges. "There were cases of employees being victimized," says SMAWU President Alex Fakudze.

Reports in the Swazi press have said some women who lost their jobs have been forced to turn to prostitution to survive. Even before the layoffs, campaigners in Swaziland had argued that the low wages in the textile plants and the housing arrangements for rural women brought in to work there have encouraged promiscuity and prostitution, contributing to the country's AIDS epidemic.

Three textile factories have recently shut down, with the owners saying they will only be re-opened if markets pick up in Europe.

Small vendors pushed out by supermarkets

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Helping them to organise

Wednesday evening as dusk falls, the streets of Manzini start to fill with women traders staking out their pitches for the next morning's weekly market.

Pavements and yards are laid out with displays of hand-woven baskets, piles of sweet potatoes, tangles of bright patterned cloth, and bundles of freshly bound grass brooms. The morning brings a bustling, colourful scene full of lively, good-humoured haggling.

However, street vendors like these and their counterparts selling fruit and vegetables from stalls around Swaziland's main commercial city are facing challenges from new economic developments. Trade unions and civil rights groups are helping them to get organized.

"In all cities and towns you will find street vendors next to the bus terminals, and now supermarkets are locating next to the bus station, selling bananas in a unit; they are competing with the street vendors and so pushing the street vendors out of the market," explains Dumezweni Dlamini, project manager of Foundation for Socio-Economic Justice.

"We want them to understand all these types of things and how they can change this type of problem."

Working with the trade unions, Dlamini's foundation is running civil education workshops for the vendors and helping to organize an informal traders' network.

"They do not have a coordinating centre, and they also do not know how their trade is affected by the global trade, in terms of prices and the issue of privatization. They don't



→Paul Ames

know the issue of taxes," he says.

The foundation has given the traders a desk at its office in central Manzini and is helping set up a coordinating body.

Advice is also being offered to help the vendors cut the cost of importing goods from South Africa and Mozambique by setting up cooperative ventures for transport, storage and bulk sales to big consumers such as schools or government offices.

Work has also begun on setting up a savings and credit scheme as well as providing more efficient links to small producers in the countryside so that both farmers and vendors can profit from ensuring surplus produce finds a market in the city.

Call to the European Union

In a statement made in 2008, the European Commission, "aware of the poverty situation in Swaziland", underlined the need for the Government to adopt a "pro-poor budget" reallocating significant funds towards the social sectors. Regarding the political situation, the Commission also recognised that the elections were fundamentally flawed, given the ban on political parties.

However, the European Union remains one of the Swazi government's key donors, through its European Development Fund (EDF). The trade links between Swaziland and the EU are also strong, especially in the sugar industry, and it is widely recognised that most of the

revenue derived from this trade directly benefits King Mswati III's regime.

ACTSA, the movement for solidarity with Southern Africa (www.actsa.org), born out of the anti-apartheid movement, is calling on the European Union to press the Swazi government to end its repression and to undertake reforms with a view establishing a multi-party democracy or face sanctions targeted at the regime leaders.

N.D.

For more information: www.actsa.org