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SECRETARIO GENERAL

Mr Recep Tayyip Erdogan
Prime Minister
Republic of Turkey
Ankara
TURKEY

Fax:+90-312-417.04.76/94.76/419.11.56

E-mail:

receptayyip.erdogan@basbakanlik.gov.tr

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Excessive police violence at Labour Day rally

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which represents over 168 million workers through its 311 affiliated organisations in 155 countries and territories, including Turkey, strongly protests at the violence used by your riot police against trade unionists who wanted to participate in a Labour Day rally in Istanbul on 1 May 2008. According to Istanbul Governor Muammer Guler, 530 demonstrators were detained and 38 people injured; the ITUC believes these numbers could eventually be a lot higher.

According to our information, the Turkish police used clubs, pepper spray, tear gas and red-dye water cannons to break up crowds of workers and students trying to reach Taksim square. This square is sadly renowned for the hideous events which took place there in 1977, when unidentified gunmen opened fire on demonstrating workers, leaving 37 of them dead. After it had been announced by the ITUC-affiliated Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DISK), the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (TÜRK-IS), and the Confederation of Public Employees' Trade Unions (KESK), that May Day demonstrations would take place on Taksim Square, your authorities banned them, threatening to use "proportional violence" if the unions were to hold actions there anyway.

After the unions announced that they would defy the ban, barricades were set up around Taksim Square. Your Government reinforced the Istanbul police force with teams from other cities and had a police helicopter hovering above the city center. What followed was nothing less than a siege of DISK's headquarters, notwithstanding the fact that the unions had announced that they would continue to rally elsewhere, as they feared that, after such power display by the Turkish police, the damage would be too great and innocent people and shop owners would be harmed or get hurt.



However, your police had already started attacking people who were gathering in front of the DISK headquarters as early as 6.15am. The building itself was blocked so that nobody could get in or out anymore, and it was inundated with teargas. Although they knew that the building was full of people, the police nevertheless continued to teargas them. A young woman, who had come out because she was experiencing serious respiratory problems, was even hit on the head by the police. In the end, a great number of people were injured, executives from DISK- and KESK-affiliated trade unions were arrested, roughed up and beaten by the police, and DISK and KESK union leaders were prevented from moving to a safer place.

Mr. Prime Minister, the images that were shown around the world left few doubts as to whether the force used by the Turkish police was excessive or not. Reports by our Turkish affiliates were even backed up by a statement from the Istanbul Bar Association, which said that the police had used excessive force on demonstrators. Even apart from the fact that threatening to use "proportional violence" when people gather to demonstrate in itself already implies that holding a rally is a criminal offense, there can be no doubt whatsoever that the amount of force and violence used by your police to counter the demonstration was completely disproportionate and inadmissible.

I am therefore calling on you to ensure that Turkey adheres to the principles of Freedom of Association and of basic trade union rights as enshrined in the fundamental ILO conventions to which Turkey is a signatory.

Yours sincerely,

General Secretary

Cc: European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), Brussels
Union Network International (UNI), Geneva
Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (TÜRK-IS), Ankara
Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DISK), Istanbul
Confederation of Public Employees' Trade Unions (KESK), Ankara
Mission of Turkey to the EU, Brussels
Embassy of Turkey, Brussels