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**MEDIA RELEASE BY THE CATHOLIC COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE
(CCSJ): PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF MIGRANT WORKERS**

Swift action must be taken to ensure that the violation of the basic human rights of migrant Chinese workers cease forthwith.

CCSJ is pleased to note that our Government is investigating concerns expressed by some 85 migrant Chinese workers who gathered along the Uriah Butler Highway on Tuesday protesting that they have to endure inhumane working and living conditions and that they were owed 2 months pay for work done for the foreign Contractor, Beijing Lujuan Construction Corporation, with whom they are employed in T&T.

CCSJ sees this recent protest as a ‘wake-up’ call to the nation and urges our Government to

- broaden the investigation to include all projects in which migrants are being used and the conditions in which they are housed by companies contracting them ;
- protect the rights/entitlements of all workers;
- ensure that the country’s labour laws are upheld; and
- take action against exploitative employers.

For the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Benedict XVI wrote a message on justice for migrants. He asks us to reflect on the condition of migrants and their families. He stated that “The Church encourages the ratification of the international legal instruments that aim to defend the rights of migrants, refugees and their families”.

He addresses the issue again in his recent Encyclical, *Charity in Truth* (2009):

“There is no doubt that foreign workers, despite any difficulties concerning integration, make a significant contribution to the economic development of the host country through their labour, besides that which they make to their country of origin through the money they send home. Obviously, these labourers cannot be considered as a commodity or a mere workforce. They must not, therefore, be

treated like any other factor of production. Every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance” (Art. 62).

Around the world today many migrants find themselves in vulnerable positions. Catholic Social Teaching states that the moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. The mere fact that our Chinese brothers are not fluent in English language means that we must stand in solidarity with them and be advocates for them. Solidarity is a key Catholic Social Justice principle. Our faith calls us to respond to their needs with compassion, solidarity and hospitality.

Love of God and love of neighbour impel us to see Christ in our migrant Chinese brothers and treat them with the respect that their inviolable, God-given dignity demands of us. Today we are challenged by the culture of death that threatens to overwhelm us with rampant crime and violence in our midst. It is in this context that we must stand up for the rights of others and build a culture of life. Exploitation of workers is violence against the person.

The media reports that the Chinese workers who were taken to our Immigration Department are all here LEGALLY. But, even if they were here illegally, as the US Bishops Migration and Refugee Services state:

“The Catholic Church has historically taught that the lack of proper legal status should never deprive persons of their God-given rights to be treated fairly and humanely in keeping with international laws. The presence of large numbers of people living in the shadows of society without recourse to fundamental legal protections is a grave injustice that the Church seeks to change.”

T&T’s painful history of slavery and indentureship should spur us to act to ensure that modern day slavery is not practised in our country – or indeed, anywhere else in the world.

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