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Workers 'exploited' in Athens run-up

From correspondents in London

INTERNATIONAL sportswear firms are violating the rights of millions of workers in a bid to fill shops with their latest goods in time for the August 2004 Olympic Games, according to a scathing report published today.

International aid agency Oxfam, together with the Clean Clothes Campaign and Global Unions organisation, accused the sportswear industry of "ruthless tactics" by denying workers their fundamental rights in the run-up to the Athens games.

At the same time, the trio of organisations launched a campaign, entitled "Play Fair", calling on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and leading sportswear manufacturers to clean up their acts.

"The IOC has an obligation to challenge the abusive business practices of its sponsors and licensees," they said in a joint statement.

"The industry needs to make prices fairer, deadlines more appropriate and treat labour standards as important a set of criteria as cost, time and quality."

The report pinpointed international sportswear firms Fila, Puma, Umbro, Asics and Mizuno as among the culprits.

"Giant sportswear brands are violating the rights of millions of workers around the world in order to fill shops with the latest and cheapest sports shoes, clothes and accessories in time for the Athens Olympics," they said.

Testimonies had been sought from workers and factory managers in Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Thailand and Turkey, they said.

"If hypocrisy and exploitation were an Olympic sport, the sportswear industry would win a medal," said Junya Yimprasert of the Thai Labour Campaign.

"The industry is sacrificing human rights in the search for profits. Should the race to outfit athletes mean a race of the bottom for these workers?"

Global Unions spokesman Guy Ryder said governments needed to resist pressure to sacrifice labour standards while local factory workers had to respect workers' rights and pay a "living wage".

"The exploitation and abuse of workers' rights endemic in the industry is violating that Olympic spirit," added Ryder, who is general secretary of the 151 million-member International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

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