

SAFETY AT WORK

Exposure to pesticides hits farm workers

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Over 90% of agricultural workers in Thailand are prone to occupational illnesses caused largely by excessive farm use of pesticide and other agrochemicals, a seminar was told yesterday.

At the seminar on occupational safety in the farm sector, Suntaree Saeng-ging, of the NGOs Coordinating Committee on Rural Development in the Northeast, said most Thai farmers grew up with the government-promoted idea that pesticide was an integral part of farm production.

As a result, Thai farmers depended

heavily on agrochemicals, especially those who produced for export markets.

Narong Promma, a representative of agricultural workers in Chiang Mai, claimed his family had suffered from exposure to excessive chemical use at tangerine plantations in Chiang Mai's Mae Ai district.

He himself was suffering from asthma, while tests showed his five-year old daughter was among over 60% of area villagers with high levels of toxic substances in their blood, Mr Narong said.

He called on the Agriculture and Cooperatives Ministry to ban imports of all hazardous chemicals currently in wide-

spread use among the farming sector.

Kumjao Ramakul, head of the bureau of occupational illnesses and environment, said statistics showed the use of pesticide and other chemicals caused some 2,000 farm workers to become ill yearly.

However, a ban on farm use of chemicals was not the best way to reduce occupational illnesses, said Dr Kumjao.

It would be more effective to educate farmers on how to use pesticide safely, and to raise their awareness of negative effects of chemicals on themselves and their communities.

Tsuyoshi Kawakami, an International

Labour Organisation specialist on occupational safety, urged the government to develop a sound policy framework to improve safety and health in the farm sector.

He suggested the government should organise workshops on occupational safety and health to help agricultural workers improve their working conditions.

The ILO has already started a pilot project in Nakhon Ratchasima and hopes to expand it to other provinces so that information could be disseminated to the majority of farm workers across the country, he said.