

**Statement by Juan Somavia  
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**On the occasion of**

**World Day for Safety and Health at Work**

**Geneva, 28 April 2011**

On this Day we recall that every year around 337 million people are victims of work accidents and more than 2.3 million people die because of occupational injuries or work-related diseases.

From mines to chemical plants, from offices to fields, work-related accidents and illness take a heavier toll in terms of lives lost and disability than global pandemics such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.

Dramatic events such as the nuclear accident at Fukushima, Japan this year or the Pike River mining accident in New Zealand last year feature in the headlines. Yet most work-related injury, illness and deaths go unnoticed and unreported. Workers and families are commonly left unprotected and unaided to cope.

The tragedy is that so many accidents, illnesses and deaths could be prevented with appropriate managerial measures. It is a matter of respecting the dignity of the human being through the dignity of work; of shaping policies that reflect the central role of work in people's lives, in peaceful communities, in stable societies and in resilient economies.

Today, the ILO highlights the role of occupational safety and health management systems as a tool to secure continual improvement. Successfully building a strong preventative safety and health culture will depend on strong commitment, collaboration and concerted action by governments, employers and workers and all stakeholders - it cannot be the sole preserve of experts. Effective strategies must, for example, embrace the training of workers.

Conventions 155 and 187, together with the ILO Guidelines of 2001, define the essential elements of a promotional framework for occupational safety and health and the key functions of a management system.

The Guidelines have become a widely used tool for developing national standards and programmes at national and enterprise level. Many countries have started to implement them through a number of voluntary or regulatory mechanisms and have formulated national strategies integrating the management systems approach. We have provided technical assistance on the application of the guidelines and courses are also offered by our International Training Centre in Turin. Given the importance of prevention, and the financial and human resource constraints of many countries, occupational safety and health is a critical area for new cooperation initiatives including South South and triangular cooperation initiatives.

We cannot lose sight of those working in the informal economy. Adequate participatory training, awareness raising and low cost measures based on local development approaches and good practices can save lives and contribute to improving work environments in the informal sector.

Experience of recent years shows that established prevention measures are effective in reducing traditional hazards and risks. However, many dangers persist or new ones have emerged. New

technologies and new forms of work organization bring new challenges. Risks associated with chemicals and bio-technologies are on the rise. So too are psychosocial risks as workers deal with the pressures of modern working life, exacerbated in times of economic crisis. This complex situation has an adverse impact on human lives, healthcare costs and on economic performance.

Occupational safety and health must be integral components of strategies for productive employment and decent work. It will involve striking the right balance between voluntary and mandatory approaches reflecting local needs and practice. But above all, occupational safety and health must become a reflex of all.

Today we recall the *raison d'être* of the ILO, embedded in its Constitution. It refers to conditions of labour *“involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled; and an improvement of those conditions is urgently required.... including... the protection of the worker against sickness, disease and injury arising out of his employment.....”*

As we witness the turbulence taking place in the Arab world today, these founding precepts resonate all the more strongly. On this OSH Day it is timely to recall the degree to which the ILO's Decent Work Agenda in its entirety is at the heart of peaceful societies.

On this World Day, let us mobilize nationally and internationally to secure a safe and healthy working environment for all giving highest priority to the principle of prevention.

It is a matter of respecting human dignity and the dignity of work. It is a matter of ensuring that decent work for all is part of the framework for sustainable growth.

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