



**Eighth (special) sitting**

Monday, 11 June 2007, 12.30 p.m.

*President: Mr. Sulka*

**ADDRESS BY HIS HIGHNESS SHAIKH SALMAN BIN  
HAMAD AL-KHALIFA, CROWN PRINCE OF THE  
KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN**

**The PRESIDENT**

I call to order the eighth (special) sitting of this session of the International Labour Conference. I now pass the floor to His Excellency, Mr. Somavia, Secretary-General of the Conference, to welcome our distinguished guest, His Highness Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Bahrain and Chairman of the Economic Development Board of the Kingdom of Bahrain.

**The SECRETARY-GENERAL**

Your Highness, Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, it is a privilege to welcome you: "*ahlan wa sahan*".

Bahrain is one of the world's oldest civilizations with a culture and rich history that stretches back more than 5,000 years.

We are honoured today to receive a leader, an innovator, with a modern vision of commitment to change.

You are a trendsetter working to confront the major challenges in the region during a time of profound transition and reform.

Your Highness, you have been a leading architect of the political liberalization programme launched under the leadership of His Majesty, King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, with the aim of bringing greater political, economic and social development to your country.

Since being named Crown Prince in 1999, you have undertaken to build efficient and responsive institutions working for a progressive country and based on democratic principles. You believe in dialogue, and, as you have said, and I quote you, "We have to reach out to the community, argue the merits of certain policy ideas, accept the challenges that come back at us and respond in a manner that brings more people on board."

Along with an ambitious political programme, you are helping to lead a series of economic and labour reforms in the midst of the transition from an oil-based economy.

In 2002 the first trade union law was passed by the National Assembly, soon after the General Federation of Bahraini Workers was established – a major breakthrough to extend labour rights for all.

Last year, the Government of Bahrain adopted the Unemployment Insurance Law, which is the first of

its kind among the States of the Gulf Cooperation Council. You are extending protection for foreign guest workers and putting a special focus on education, training and skills, especially for young people.

Dear friends, His Highness is also recognized for his support for social development and gender equality. Let me say, Your Highness, how proud we have all been in seeing the General Assembly of the United Nations so ably presided over by a distinguished Bahraini woman, Haya bint Rashid Al-Khalifa. This august assembly may be interested to learn that this is only the third time in history that a woman has chaired the General Assembly, and the first in almost 40 years. Your Highness, they know that I keep insisting on gender equality in the delegations here, so they would not be surprised that I am highlighting this fact.

Your Highness, Bahrain has also been a pioneer in a global effort to establish Decent Work Country Programmes, beginning with a pilot programme in 2002, one of the first of its kind. We look forward to moving with you in supporting a fully-fledged country programme that embodies our shared values and the very best of our tripartite experience.

As you build on your future, and move with the complexities of our times, we see you striving to ensure that all levels and institutions are in place so that the transition occurs in a sustainable manner, as you have said.

Your Highness, we thank you for being with us at this ILO assembly of governments, employers and workers of the world, and it is my proud honour to welcome you to this august assembly.

**SHAIKH SALMAN BIN HAMAD AL-KHALIFA (Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Bahrain)**

It is a pleasure for me to be with you today to discuss such an important issue. One of the reasons why I feel privileged to be here with you today is because I believe that the ILO is an Organization which has, at its core – in its soul – an understanding that the labour market is not simply an economic issue. It is deeply personal.

There are few things in life that make as much difference to the human condition as a sense of dignity. It is this quality, and a quest to create more of it, that must drive the ILO.

Dignity is a difficult thing to quantify. It comes in part from a sense of ourselves, in part from our families and in part from our communities, our creeds and our philosophies. Increasingly, in the modern world, our sense of dignity is intrinsically linked to our employment – the economic activities

that we undertake on a day-to-day basis for an employer or for ourselves – and the way in which this career is viewed by our wider communities. It gives us our status, quite literally our state and our condition of being.

So it affects each one of us as an individual. It also has an impact on our nation's well-being. Indeed, our regional economies are increasingly labelled according to the type of work our people carry out each day. There are, for example rural economies, knowledge-based economies, service-led economies and manufacturing economies. From these descriptions, it becomes increasingly clear that the individual economy and the local economy can no longer exist in isolation. Instead of sharing skills and goods with our actual neighbours just generations ago, we are now sharing skills and goods on a worldwide scale with neighbouring countries or even continents. So the local is global and the global local. It would seem that we are all world workers now whether we are waiting on tables in Geneva or designing cutting-edge technology in Silicon Valley. Whether we work in high finance in Manama or run a smallholding in Mumbai, our lives, our businesses and our economies are intertwined more deeply than they have ever been in the history of humankind.

In our Kingdom of Bahrain, and indeed across the Gulf, our economies are dependent on globalized workforces. We are building our cities and our economies thanks in no small part to a section of the labour force that hails from Arab countries, the Indian subcontinent, from parts of South-East Asia and from other nations and communities. It is a global labour force. Of course we are not alone in relying on a workforce from other nations. The United States has long relied on workers from around the globe and, throughout Europe, migratory workforces have been instrumental in securing economic success, stimulating diversity, bringing new ideas and fuelling innovation.

So, although Bahrain is an island our economy is not. We welcome guest workers from across the world who come to the Gulf looking for a better life. We need to protect their access to income and employment, certainly. But in doing so, we must recognize that some villages and communities may be left without some of their natural human resources and will become increasingly vulnerable at the whim of global market forces beyond their control and sometimes beyond their sphere of comprehension.

At the same time, we are creating an increasing imbalance within our own labour markets and it is something that is simply not sustainable and that does a disservice to our own people, their futures and their understanding of what work is and does. This is why it is imperative that we work together towards fair globalization, globalization with justice, and why it is important for us to tap into the vital resource that this forum, the ILO, provides.

We must address the four cornerstones of the Decent Work Agenda by creating employment first and foremost, but then also guaranteeing that there are rights associated with that work, that social protection is extended and that opportunities for dialogue and conflict resolution are available to all. In the Gulf, there are issues regarding our labour market that need to be addressed. We need to start now, today, by admitting this to ourselves and among ourselves if we really are to move forward as a

united global economic force. For this is already in our grasp; we are using the resources from our mineral wealth more strategically and sustainably than ever before. We are diversifying, we are building and we are innovative. Today must be a stepping-stone towards decision-making and definite action, not simply a balm with which we can soothe ourselves safe in the belief that our presence here is enough to signal our commitment to a more just and fair future, for it is not enough.

I believe that we must address three core issues relating to our labour needs now if we are to strengthen our lead for the long term. These issues have the potential to derail our progress, but they are issues that Bahrain has made a commitment to deal with head on and is already seeing successes as a result of this commitment.

First, we must address the reality of our changing demographics that brings with it an increasingly young workforce. Second, something I have just touched on, we must address our need to rely on imported workforces and, third, we must be committed to the creation of an environment that provides inclusive opportunities for success. We must give our young people not just access to education and economic inclusion, but also access to aspiration. Every child deserves the chance to become whatever he or she wants to become, based on skills, hard work and determination.

By making a commitment today to building a shared platform to increase social dialogue to address these three key issues we can begin to build workable solutions. Solutions that have the support of those in work and those looking for work and the support of stakeholders across government and the private sector and in education, trade unions and in non-governmental organizations.

In Bahrain, as I mentioned, we are making innovative strides. I believe these moves merit recognition and can serve as models for regional cross-governmental initiatives. We have undertaken a comprehensive economic reform programme. It is a programme that looks at labour market reform and education reform together holistically. It recognizes the need for our education system to match the economic ambitions and aspirations of our nation and will fill skills gaps in the labour market of today and of the future. Our approach goes beyond simply the needs of our own citizens. It embraces the entire labour market, our global workforce. This realistic yet innovative position will serve us well and allow our economy and our talents to grow and take us forward through the century.

We have created two new public bodies that will make our home-grown workforce increasingly attractive to industry and help build our own new breed of entrepreneurs. The Labour Fund has been established and has increased productivity among private sector companies, large or small, with a direct impact on our economic growth. In addition, the Fund is developing and implementing training and retraining programmes with partners in our private companies, universities and colleges. This training is focused on the development of the skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace across key identified growth industries. The Labour Fund seeks to fill the gaps, not only in our current labour market but also in the market of the future. Its focus is on productivity, creativity, innovation and building skills that will allow us to realize our dreams as a nation.

The Labour Fund's partner is a labour market regulatory authority, a body that crosses government departments to formulate the best possible approach to our national labour market structure. It creates a system whereby there is a free and fair access to employees, whether guest or local, at equal cost to employers. It ensures that employers can focus on productivity while guaranteeing that all employees have access to decent work, freedom of mobility and work in a safe and dignified environment.

At the same time, we are removing the contradictory legislation of quotas for Bahraini employees. This is legislation that hampers the growth of the private sector while simultaneously patronizing the very people it was created to support.

With the help of the ILO, we have initiated unemployment insurance protection and are building a comprehensive employment programme to match the skills and needs of those looking for work with available employment opportunities. Furthermore we are aligning our education system far more closely with the needs of employers at every level to ensure that what our students learn in the classroom gives them skills and experience they need to succeed in the workplace, and the creativity and drive needed to start a business of their own. We are looking to the future to identify the next growth industries and are developing training programmes tailored to these sectors, in which we know our young people will be able to find rewarding and stimulating careers. We are developing not only our academic programmes in primary and secondary schools but also vocational programmes. For example, we are creating a polytechnic institute with a focus on practical experiences to enable everyone to get fair access to a good education that provides a decent standard of living.

Let me also stress here that Bahrain is committed to the freedom of all workers to join unions and the freedom for unions to be formed. We encourage open and honest communication and dialogue between employees and employers and we respect the effective role that unions can play in ensuring channels are open to enable this dialogue to take place.

These are just some of the ways in which we in Bahrain are addressing not just the needs of global market forces but also much more pressing individual needs, such as the right to decent work, the right to work with a sense of dignity and the right to work that allows people to provide for their families and their communities.

I would like at this time to pay tribute to all those people who have invested time and energy in working to improve the labour market in Bahrain, whether they are in government, in the private sector or in the unions themselves, and who have endeavoured to understand our individual situation, at the deepest level, and then with real innovation and foresight have outlined strategies and solutions that meet the ambitions and the aims of our people.

I touched earlier on the pressing employment issue in Bahrain and throughout the Middle East created by a rapidly changing demographic. Unlike many western nations that are now seeing their birth rates decline rapidly and their populations age, in the Middle East we have a thriving young population. In fact, in the Middle East and North Africa region, almost 20 per cent of the population, in other words one in five people, is aged between 15 and 24 years. This means that we have an amazing

and largely untapped resource of youth, enthusiasm and vitality. We have a pool of global citizens, ready and able to embrace technology and play their role in a knowledge-based economic future.

This is a great blessing for us, but it is also one that we need to nurture carefully, for as the aims and purpose of the ILO so clearly point out, poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere. And poor young men are perhaps its greatest threat. We must ensure that our young people do not find themselves disenfranchised. Unemployment and, more importantly, unemployment are capable of causing great harm at an individual level and at a societal level.

As we have already acknowledged, these employment issues do not have an impact simply on a solitary home or village. Instead, they create a malaise and discontent which, if allowed to, like a disease, will eat away at the very fabric of our civilization.

Let me also take this opportunity to mention an issue that is of deep importance to us all. We must not forget the efforts and the needs of our brothers and sisters labouring in Palestine, who are hard-working people struggling, with decency and dignity, against a tide that threatens to overturn them at any moment. We call for the end of the illegal Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories through dialogue that leads to a mutually agreed two-State solution. We also call for the immediate easing of the economic conditions that have led to indefensible levels of unemployment, currently at 60 per cent. These steps are key to ensuring that hope is allowed to remain and the light of justice is not extinguished.

When it comes to the quest for solutions, I call on public and private sectors to work together, to invest together and to find new routes to prosperity and, through this prosperity, peace. For I strongly believe that many of the problems of discontent, discord and hostility around the world can be changed, in no small part, by making economic improvements to ordinary lives and by increasing access to and an abundance of dignity.

That is why, today, here and now I call on our neighbours and our partners in the Cooperation Council and across Asia to join with me. I call upon the Heads of State to accept my invitation to come to Bahrain to take part in the first interregional social dialogue summit on labour issues, which will bring together sending and receiving countries for the first time at that level to discuss openly and honestly the real impacts of globalization on each of our home nations.

And I call for the involvement not just of governments, for it must be true social dialogue and true debate if we are to forge integrated decent work agendas and if we are to foster dignity. Join us in Bahrain and together we can build the tripartite social dialogue structure within our region. Workers, employers and governments should come together, talk together and work together for the well-being of all of our futures.

Finally, let me close by saying that I understand we are dealing with a difficult reality. There are no simple answers and no quick fixes, but we have been trusted by the people of our respective nations to build societies which provide the best possible opportunities in life and which give them decency and dignity. We are not bystanders at the whims of the global economy. We are the people who shape

that economy. And if we choose to shape it for short-term gain and by working in isolation, then we risk building a future that we may not like when we get there.

Today, the ILO has given us an opportunity, a platform, a springboard, that we can choose to use, or not, to forge a better future for us all, a future which will enable all our workers and our citizens to live and work a decent and dignified life. Let us all put in the effort, let us not waste this chance.

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The PRESIDENT

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Your Highness, many thanks for the words which show the extent to which the ILO may count on Bahrain as a friend. The Organization has deeply appreciated the active contribution of your Government in its work.

The Kingdom of Bahrain is among the Gulf States that are showing the way ahead, by including social elements in their development programmes. The country's exemplary health-care system, compensation for work-related accidents and the public edu-

cation system – the oldest in the Arabian peninsula – all make Bahrain one of the most forward-looking countries in the region. The wide-ranging labour market reform engaged by Bahrain confirms this wish to progress in both the social and economic fields.

I cannot close without mentioning your Highness' influence in the troubled Arab region. The Director-General's Report on the situation of workers of the occupied Arab territories once again paints a dark picture this year. Your Highness' voice of reason and peace is heard within the region and beyond.

With Your Highness' persistence, reason will surely prevail and peace will come.

On behalf of my fellow Officers of the Conference and all participants, I should like to express profound gratitude to Your Highness for your words to the 96th Session of the International Labour Conference today.

*(The Conference adjourned at 1 p.m.)*

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