



## Tenth (special) sitting

Tuesday, 12 June 2007, 10.15 a.m.

*President: Mr. Sulka*

### ADDRESS BY THE MOST HONOURABLE PORTIA SIMPSON MILLER, PRIME MINISTER OF JAMAICA

#### The PRESIDENT

I call to order the tenth (special) sitting of this session of the International Labour Conference. This morning we are honoured by the visit of the Most Honourable Portia Simpson Miller, Prime Minister of Jamaica. I shall pass the floor to Mr. Somavia, Secretary-General of the Conference, to welcome our distinguished guest.

#### The SECRETARY-GENERAL

Prime Minister, what a profound honour to have you with us here.

Exactly 12 years ago, almost to this day, a labour minister strode up to this podium and addressed the plenary with wise and moving words.

“Experience”, she said, “leads us to appreciate that unemployment is more than socio-economic. It is political. If we can develop the laser beam, if we can travel at top speed on the information super-highway, if we can discover the secrets of the ocean beds and send space ships to traverse the heavens, why can’t we rid ourselves of the scourge of poverty and unemployment?”

Through the years the same labour minister never stopped talking about the difficult questions, and when someone asked “can Jamaica elect a woman as its Prime Minister”, she did not just answer the question, she answered the call.

So ladies and gentlemen, we now have Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller. Prime Minister, how proud we are to welcome back a former labour minister, one of our own, as her country’s first ever female Prime Minister. Welcome home!

I think that my friends, the labour ministers present, are certainly inspired with hope from your career. So you are not only at home with this Conference, you are truly at home with the values that underlie our mission and the ideals that underlie our work.

Your fellow countryman, Bob Marley, made a call “Get up, stand up for your rights!” You have lived by such a call. As Minister of Labour, and as a passionate spokesperson for dignity and social justice, you stamped your mark on our Organization. I can still remember the conversation I had with you when you visited the ILO in my first years as Director-General.

You have been a pioneer in elevating local government and placing communities at the centre of development. As Prime Minister, you are carrying

forward your leadership as a champion for human rights, individual liberty, emphasizing gender equality and respect for all.

Your people-centred agenda follows up your powerful message to the global committee of the World Summit on Social Development, a message I recall so well. You said in Copenhagen that there can be no social development without individual and social empowerment. Prime Minister, Jamaica is open to the world, you welcome people, business investments from around the globe, but you are also at the heart of the challenge of tackling inequalities that can tear societies apart, by making sure that markets are seen in terms of people, not the other way around.

Building bridges, reaching consensus, is the key to your style. Through your unique combination of determination and skills, heart and soul, you have risen from rural poverty to become a powerful leader. I think you are an example for so many in Jamaica, the Caribbean and certainly far beyond, especially for all those women who are striving, against all the odds, overcoming all the obstacles, to deliver for their families, their communities, their countries.

Prime Minister, if you will permit me, I cannot put it better than the words of your campaign song: “Don’t you underestimate the strength of a woman!”

Let me conclude by saying this. I know it is often said of you that, “while the nation sleeps she works”. Well, dear friends, it is now 10 a.m. in Geneva, that is 3 a.m. in Jamaica, and you are here, at work for justice, for dignity, for decent work, as you have always been.

For all of that we thank you, we salute you and we certainly welcome you at the ILO.

#### Ms. PORTIA SIMPSON MILLER (*Prime Minister, Jamaica*)

What a delight it is for me to address this august assembly and to bring you warm greetings from the Government and people of Jamaica.

I extend congratulations to the esteemed Director-General, Ambassador Somavia, and to the staff of the ILO for another successful year of operations.

In the past, I had the honour to participate in these annual assemblies on a number of occasions as Minister of Labour, and so I am especially pleased to do so today as Jamaica’s first female Prime Minister. From the halls of the ILO to Prime Minister of Jamaica, and as our Director-General placed it on the table this morning to all ministers of labour, you can do it.

As a leader with experience in smashing proverbial glass ceilings, I am happy to note that your strong efforts to have more women represented in delegations to this Conference are yielding some positive results. For most in the ILO, gender empowerment is not a fad nor a cliché, it is an imperative, a relentless demand and a clarion call.

Over the years, the ILO has been at the forefront of the struggle for gender equality and empowerment, it has continued to raise its voice against the marginalization of women at the workplace and in society, the marginalization of female labour and the depression of their wages and conditions, which have been totally and vigorously opposed by the ILO. It has been said that women hold up half the sky. I say no, women hold up all the sky because they are mothers and nurturers. Apart from being a great injustice, marginalizing women is an economic burden on society. I was pleased to receive the Director-General's kind invitation to address this special sitting of the 96th Session of the International Labour Conference with its focus on promoting decent work.

I address you today in a spirit of international solidarity with the social and economic objectives of the Organization. The major theme I want to underscore in the context of decent work is that the ILO development agenda is not only necessary but sustainable. Over the nine decades of its existence, the ILO has scored some major victories which should be acknowledged, celebrated and defended. These gains should strengthen our resolve in the fight against poverty and for global justice, development and equity. Today's observance of the World Day Against Child Labour is a successful example of the dynamic advocacy role of the ILO. The lives of many children have been preserved and improved through the multifaceted activities of the ILO. We must continue this struggle so that no child will have to suffer.

Let us consider for a moment the frustrating effect of poverty by comparing it to the impact of the tsunami. The *Human Development Report 2005* notes that 300,000 lives were lost in the December 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean. The publication concludes, and I quote: "With today's technology, financial resources and accumulated knowledge, the world has the capacity to overcome extreme deprivation. Yet as an international community we allow poverty to destroy lives on a scale that dwarfs the impact of the tsunami." We have an obligation to address the issue of poverty in a meaningful way or face the prospect of being caught up in the devastating wake of a human tsunami of frustration, rage and rebellion. The Decent Work Agenda is a critical initiative to stem the development of this potential human tsunami. The path of decent and productive work for all has many obstacles, not least of which are the effects of international terrorism, the negative aspects of globalization, tense and strained relationships among countries and within countries, armed conflicts, HIV/AIDS, rising oil prices and global warming. Yet, even in the face of such daunting challenges we must continue on the journey with a strong sense of purpose. As a result of the sustained efforts of the ILO, the Decent Work Agenda has become an essential feature of strategies for balancing economic and social development. This reflects my own passionate commitment to balancing people's lives while balancing the books. This is not a choice, it is a global imperative.

Our first national hero, the Right Excellent Marcus Mosiah Garvey, once said: "... great principles, great ideals, know no nationality". Decent work for all is a great principle and a great ideal. It is essential to achieving social justice, prosperity and a better quality of life for all people everywhere.

Realization of the Decent Work Agenda begins with the clear conviction that people must be at the centre of national development. To achieve this, the Agenda must embrace justice and equity. It is my firm belief that these qualities must form the moral compact that guides our attitudes and actions. They must be reflected in labour relations, community development, public and private sector partnerships and relations with our global neighbours. However, for lasting success at the national level, the principles of justice and equity must also apply to international relations and rules. International rules need to ensure that all countries, no matter how small, have economic and trade opportunities that are fair and just. This will support decent work and stimulate development at the national level. In addressing the critical imperatives for balancing economic and social development, within the context of the Decent Work Agenda, particular emphasis must be placed on education and training, job creation and employability, sustainable businesses and social protection. The first imperative is unquestionably education, the driving force for the transformation that must take place if developing economies are to achieve global economic competitiveness and improve the quality of life for our people.

Such a programme of education must embrace technical and professional skills training that will prepare our people to do dignified and productive work locally, regionally and internationally. This is the path Jamaica has embarked upon. Education is the foundation around which everything revolves. While transforming the education system, we are giving priority attention to early childhood education. We recognize that if we start them right we make them bright.

The second imperative towards decent work is job creation and employability. Economic activity must drive the creation of jobs, as jobless growth is not a viable option. We have placed economic growth with jobs at the heart of our economic plan. As a consequence, we are experiencing the lowest rate of unemployment in recent history.

Notwithstanding this, we are still not where we want to be. Under the slogan "Today's Jamaica Means Business", we pursue financial investments that will make a significant contribution to poverty reduction, while providing a fair return on investment. We will ensure that these investments are in conformity with the Decent Work Agenda. In Jamaica, we vigorously and consistently promote working conditions that are above the core labour standards.

Another area of job opportunities for our people is migration. However, Jamaica, like other developing countries, faces challenges with the free movement of skills. While there are opportunities to be derived from migration, our countries also face the negative impact. We must explore strategies such as bilateral agreements with host countries investing in the training of a sufficient number of our people so that they can recruit without leaving a skills deficit.

Over the years, Jamaica has established successful bilateral programmes for farm workers and workers in the hospitality industry. With this experience,

similar initiatives should be considered for other categories of workers. Within this job creation and employability imperative, it is essential that special attention be given to youth. We, of the Caribbean region, are pleased that following on recommendations for youth employment at the 93rd Session of the International Labour Conference held in 2005, the ILO Subregional Office for the Caribbean organized a Tripartite Caribbean Employment Forum in Barbados in October 2006. The outcome of that meeting is promising. One new aspect of our approach to youth employment in Jamaica is capitalizing on the abundance of talent and interests of our young people. We intend to focus attention on generating job opportunities in the cultural and creative industries, which include music, sports and entertainment.

The third imperative facing us is that of building sustainable businesses. Such enterprises are important for providing decent and productive work. They also help to generate the financial support needed for social development. The reality in many developing countries is that the size of the labour force is outstripping growth of employment in the formal economy. As a result, the informal economy is accounting for a larger segment of the workforce. The informal economy, made up mainly of women and persons from disadvantaged groups, has to contribute to the decent work objective. To do so, greater emphasis and a sense of urgency must be directed at structuring this expanding area of economic activity into sustainable business enterprises.

Last year, my administration took a strategic decision to provide significant financial support to micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. This strategy is aimed primarily at job creation and poverty reduction. This was done in partnership with public and private sector institutions. It is our intention that this initiative will serve as a catalyst for encouraging more private sector investment and participation in micro and small business enterprises.

The fourth imperative is that of social protection. This is an absolute necessity in creating a balance between economic and social development. Strategies for social protection must balance the needs for proper housing, health care and basic amenities with an ability to respond to emergencies. These emergencies include unpredictable shocks in the economy and natural disasters. In Jamaica, by deliberate policy we have established several programmes to enhance the protection of the poor and vulnerable. Among them is a programme for advancement through health and education PASS (Programme for Alternative Student Support). It provides thousands of families with social protection benefits linked to education and health.

Another programme introduced just two weeks ago by my Government is the removal of all fees for persons under 18 years who use hospitals and health facilities which fall under the Ministry of Health. Additionally, we are implementing low-income housing programmes with special emphasis on the shelter needs of the urban poor and workers in the sugar and hospitality industries as part of our social protection policy. In describing the condition of the poor, Bob Marley shocked the world's conscience when he sang: "Cold ground was my bed last night and rock was my pillow too ...". The goal of my Government is to ensure that no Jamaican will live that life in the future.

These are some of the necessary and practical steps we have taken in translating the goal of decent and productive work into reality. We have learned that economic growth is meaningless if the majority of the people are left behind in the process. People must be the object and the focus of development. With its long history of effecting change for the benefit of workers, the ILO is well placed to continue acting as a conduit for the measures necessary to achieve decent work for all.

Allow me to offer a few recommendations. Firstly, in order to advance the Decent Work Agenda I urge that consideration be given to broadening the existing tripartite arrangement to embrace other civil society partners. Secondly, members of the tripartite groups, government, employers and trade unions must intensify their efforts to persuade multilateral agencies to provide additional training, technical cooperation and financial assistance for development initiatives. This is one way in which we could all assist the ILO's effort in achieving its Decent Work Agenda. Thirdly, the ILO should continue lending its voice in a more direct way to the call for a reform of the international financial and trading systems. Fourthly, the Doha Development Round is crucial, the members of the ILO family must insist that the promise of the Doha Development Agenda are delivered. Studies show that the realization of these objectives have the potential to lift some 500 million people out of poverty if global barriers to trade are removed.

Lastly, but significantly to make all of this possible, all our member States must amplify and support the call for extra-budgetary support for ILO activities. Economic success has to be inextricably linked to social progress if the Decent Work Agenda is to be meaningful. At the same, time the new borderless world dictates that we can only survive and flourish if we think and act as one global family living in one global village and in one life, to borrow a phrase from the late Jamaican singer, poet and philosopher, Bob Marley.

As I stand on the platform of this noble international organization, I am inspired by the cause that unites us. That cause is the essential activity of human survival and the advancement of civilization through decent and productive work. It was the poet Kahlil Gibran who said that work is love made visible. Let us rededicate ourselves to the great cause of bringing love into visibility by supporting the advancement of the Decent Work Agenda.

It is a critical pathway to creating a world that serves every man, woman and child. I urge all the members of this assembly and leaders everywhere to join in this urgent mission to eradicate poverty and misery.

That great pan-Africanist Marcus Mosiah Garvey reminds us of the hellish state that poverty is, and I quote: "Poverty is a hellish state to be in. It is no virtue, it is a crime. To be poor is to be hungry, without possible hope of food; to be sick without hope of medicine; to be tired and sleepy without a place to lay one's head; to be naked without a hope of clothing; to be despised and comfortless. To be poor is to be a fit subject for crime and hell."

It is for this reason that we have to work assiduously for the elimination of poverty globally. Failure is not an option. I summon you to unite and find the courage and the determination, the will and the way to promote decent work and to fight the scourge of poverty. We cannot allow our people to

be swept away by the destructive tide of poverty and marginalization.

The ILO has been, and will always be, the conscience of the world in defence of the rights of the working poor. The marginalized are the most vulnerable in our societies. Jamaica salutes your work as a vital part of the United Nations system. We will continue to be with you in this noble cause of decent work for all.

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The PRESIDENT

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Thank you, Prime Minister, for those words, which show how closely your political, national and international vision is in harmony with the principles and the objectives of the International Labour Organization.

The International Labour Conference is proud to receive Jamaica's first ever woman Prime Minister,

but it is prouder still to receive a Head of Government whose reputation for building social equity and peace goes before her.

The international community recognizes you as an advocate of the poor, the dispossessed and oppressed, as one dedicated to defending the down-trodden and to improving the quality of people's lives. Your speech today has reaffirmed this reputation, and your views on development, change and progress, both at home and at the global level, are entirely pertinent to the work of the Conference.

On my own behalf, and that of my fellow Officers and all the participants at the Conference, I should like to express our profound gratitude for your visit.

I now close the tenth (special) sitting of this session of the International Labour Conference.

*(The Conference adjourned at 10.45 a.m.)*

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