

The ILO – 90 years of hope

A better world starts here.

Opening Remarks by Ms. Sachiko Yamamoto,
Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific and
Assistant Director-General, International Labour Organization

- On the occasion of the ILO's 90th anniversary celebrations,
Presidential Secretariat,
Colombo, Sri Lanka, 28th April, 2009

- **His Excellency Mahinda Rajapaksa,**
President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka,

- **Hon. Athauda Seneviratne,**
Minister of Labour Relations and Manpower

- **Hon. DEW Gunasekara**
Minister of Constitutional Affairs and National Integration

- **Hon. Dinesh Gunawardena**
Minister of Urban Development and Sacred Area Development

- **Mr. Ravi Peiris**
Director-General, Employers' Federation of Ceylon

- **Mr. Leslie Devendra**
General Secretary, SLNSS

- **Ms. Tine Staermose**
Director, ILO Colombo

- **Ambassadors and Members of the Diplomatic Corp, Distinguished Guests,
ILO and UN Colleagues – Ladies and Gentlemen.**

First, I would like to thank His Excellency the President and the Hon. Ministers for taking the time to attend today and support this important occasion. It is an indication of the special relationship that the ILO has developed with the Government of Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka has always been a strong supporter of the ILO. Colombo has been home to the ILO's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in the 1960s. Sri Lanka is a country that has ratified all the ILO Core Conventions. Sri Lankans have held the

chairpersonship of the Governing Body and in the International Labour Conference in 2007, You your-self, Excellency, addressed the International Labour Conference.

So it is my great pleasure and honour to be celebrating the 90th anniversary of our Organization here with you today.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

The world yearns for a safe pair of hands to help us through these uncertain times, to ensure that principles of fairness, equity and social justice are upheld. Globally, and particularly here in Asia and the Pacific, there is a widespread desire to correct some of the failures of globalization.

For many years now, we had been witnessing rapid economic growth – but it was uneven growth. It was growth with joblessness attached. Now we are facing either negative growth, or at least slowing growth – compounded with more joblessness.

In other words, in order to restore growth we must work doubly hard to make sure no one is left out – not just restore a lopsided system that benefited some but not others. Employment should not only meet the basic needs of people today but it should offer some hope of social and economic progress.

Given that the International Labour Organization is the United Nations' agency that deals with work and workplace issues – and its unique three-part structure of Governments, Workers and Employers – it is no surprise that we are being called upon to help respond to this current crisis. This challenge comes at a significant moment for the ILO, as it marks its 90th anniversary.

Here in Colombo, and right across this vast region, the economic and jobs crises we face are of great concern. But they also offer us an opportunity to make the world of work actually work better for the world.

For example, the greening of the economy, and the emergence of a political will to drive that forward, is an opportunity to rebuild jobs and lives in a more sustainable way. Employment should not only meet our basic needs today but it should offer some hope of social and economic progress to individuals and societies. This is what we mean by decent work.

90 years is a long time. But, in my view, the crisis we face today shows that the ILO's mandate is as fresh, relevant and universal today as it has ever been. Just consider how, as times have changed, the ILO's mandate has adapted to and incorporated changes in the world of work.

The ILO's Conventions have set the internationally recognized standards that most of us now take for granted; including the eight-hour work day, basic workplace safety standards, maternity protection, an end to child and forced labour, equality, the right to organize and speak out. Here in Sri Lanka – and on these very issues – we have a long partnership in working together with the Government of Sri Lanka, workers and employers organisations.

On the ILO's 90th birthday it is right that we should feel pride in the achievements of the past nine decades. But what is more important is the future. We must use this occasion to look ahead and renew our support for the fundamental principles the ILO stands for and - in these testing times - plan how we can work, together, to further social justice and achieve decent work for all.

So, the message of the ILO's 90th birthday is one of hope - a better world starts here – if we so choose.

Thank you.