

Ratnapura - a Child Labour Free Zone by 2016!

The District Secretary and the Administration of Ratnapura, assisted by the Ministry of Labour and Labour Relations, with technical and financial support from the ILO are embarking on a journey that will make the district officially free of Child Labour by June 2016.

The declaration of this worthy exercise which will make substantial strides in the welfare and development of children is being made on the 12th June 2013, in Ratnapura in the presence of the ILO Representative Mr Donglin Li and many other dignitaries marking the **World Day against Child Labour**.

Several creative activities are being implemented to rid the district of the scourge of child labour. The first of these was the planning process which included the setting up of a **Child Labour Free Zone**. Thereafter a process has been initiated to identify children engaged in child labour as well as those who are likely to be engaged and to set up an information data base, which will be updated constantly. Concurrently an awareness campaign is being carried out among officials of the district, school authorities, political leaders, religious dignitaries, the management of plantations, trade union leaders and children themselves. Families who are likely to send their children to work will be assisted through various social protection schemes to improve their quality of life, which in turn will be a deterrent to sending children out to work. There will also be a structured rehabilitation programme to restore the lives of children who are rescued from child labour. Creative visibility material and signage too will be displayed at strategic locations.

15 standards have been developed to ensure a child-friendly programme, which will be guided and managed by a Steering Committee.

Guy Ryder, Director General of ILO in his statement made a strong appeal for urgent global action to tackle child labour in domestic work. He emphasized the need to ensure that all children have access to a quality basic education and are learning, at least to the minimum age of employment.

Ratnapura is home to approximately 4000 children who are engaged in child labour that includes Hazardous Forms of Child Labour. Child labour also takes place in gem mines, rural agricultural livelihoods, and a thriving informal sector. Girls in particular are moved out of the district and plantations to serve as domestic workers outside Ratnapura.

The idea of eliminating all forms of child labour prioritizing its worst forms for elimination by 2016 was proposed at The Hague Global Child Labour Conference in May 2010. This was followed by the development and validation of a Road Map in Sri Lanka in June that year. Sri Lanka is signatory to ILO Convention 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labour and ILO Convention 138 on Minimum Age of Employment.

This programme to establish a Child Labour Free Zone at district level is expected to be a model and sets the tone for scaling up of activities across the 25 districts in Sri Lanka to work towards reaching the target of zero tolerance for the worst forms of child labour by 2016.