

Transcript of speech by ILO Director-General Juan Somavia, World Congress on Safety and Health at Work, Seoul, 29 June – 2 July 2008

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Transcript:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to join you in this opening of the World Congress on Safety and Health at Work.

Let me begin by conveying my deepest appreciation to our gracious hosts: the Government of the Republic of Korea – and the Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency.

Two years ago, Korean tripartite constituents warmly welcomed the ILO to Busan for the Asian Regional Meeting. It set in motion the Asian Decent Work Decade.

Once again Korea is demonstrating its commitment by generously supporting this Congress.

I am certain you will give all of us clear policy directions for the future as you have done so well in the past.

You are coming together at a time of major, even historical, economic and social transformation.

And you are doing so in a region and in a country at the very centre of these changes.

There are many opportunities. There are many exciting prospects.

But it is also a time of uncertainty and anxiety.

- Rapid technological development,
- economic globalization, with often unfair rules
- stiff competitive pressures,
- financial and food crises,
- unemployment and informal work
- as well as environmental challenges, are fostering for too many a sense of unease and insecurity.

So we must reaffirm the values, founded on the dignity of work and the worker, to help chart a course that combines productivity and growth with social cohesion and equity,

This is the vision of Decent Work for a Fair Globalization based on social justice.

Decent work must be safe work.

Protecting workers against sickness, disease and workplace injuries is enshrined in the ILO's Constitution.

And the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognize the right to a safe and healthy working environment.

Your participation in this Congress reflects a commitment to ensuring that work is life sustaining, not life threatening.

And to sending a strong message that injury and disease should not “go with the job”.

Thank you for that.

You know well from experience that prevention pays off.

Protecting workers' health is integral for social and economic development. But we must redouble our efforts.

Still, some two million women and men are estimated to lose their lives each year because of work related causes. Unacceptable figures.

And the human cost of poor protection carries an economic price tag – with losses totalling as much as 4% of the world's GDP.

An enormous amount. A loss for everybody.

Our collective obligation and an ILO primary responsibility, is to continue forging practical solutions and innovative strategies for protecting the life, health and well-being of workers everywhere.

And I would point to three critical areas.

First, we must tailor tools for safety and health strategies to the realities of small and micro enterprises.

Second, our concerns must also be with workers in the informal economy where we find the majority of workers today.

And third, our strategies must embrace systematic knowledge sharing and results-oriented cooperation programmes.

Dear friends,

For the first time, this Congress was preceded by a Summit of leaders from across the spectrum.

Strategies for safe work make the biggest difference when based on a broad commitment.

As the theme of the Congress reminds us, it is indeed a societal responsibility.

As we continue, let us remember:

- Committed governmental policy is essential
- Social dialogue is the basis for solid solutions, built on shared interests, trust and consensus building.
- Freedom to organize and strong employers' and workers' organizations are the foundation for successful dialogue
- And let's not forget that we need sensitive and aware workplace managers who can deal with real life situations.

With that conviction, I wish all of you a very fruitful and successful World Congress.

Thank you.