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Special sitting

Friday, 8 June 2012, 11.05 a.m.

President: Mr Alburquerque de Castro

**ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY
MR MOHAMED MONCEF MARZOUKI,
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF TUNISIA**

Original Spanish: The PRESIDENT

The International Labour Conference is honoured to receive the visit of His Excellency Mr Moncef Marzouki, President of the Republic of Tunisia. I give the floor to the Secretary-General of the Conference, Mr Somavia, to welcome and introduce our distinguished guest.

Original French: The SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE CONFERENCE

President Marzouki, we are very proud to welcome you to this session of the International Labour Conference.

We are very honoured to have you with us. Through you, we are witnessing a chapter of history, that of the Arab Spring, and we would like to pay tribute here to the leading role that your country has played. The spark ignited on 17 December 2012 has spread and captivated the imagination of the entire world. We have all shared that historic moment when not only young people, but also women and men of all ages gathered together to demand freedom, dignity, respect and social justice.

Today we also pay tribute to you – a man who, throughout his life, has placed the defence of human rights in Tunisia, the Arab world and beyond at the very heart of his choices and commitments.

As a medical doctor, you took an interest in medical ethics and social medicine, but you were already politically engaged. You thus know the price of freedom, having been arrested many times, imprisoned and forced into exile.

You have shown that nothing can withstand the force of determination to fight to the end for one's ideas.

I am very moved today to welcome you here, having myself been personally involved in the fight for democracy and human rights in my own country, Chile.

As you know, one of the main subjects of this session of the International Labour Conference is the promotion of decent employment for young people. In your country, young people have been at the forefront of change by expressing their aspirations to live, to develop, to contribute and to work in freedom and social justice. They participated enthusiastically in the national consultations on young people and employment policy in Tunisia, held on

12 April 2012 with the ILO in preparation for this Conference.

Today, we agree that the stability and socio-economic progress of our societies depends on how we all respond to their demands.

Your presence here reminds us of your commitment to the values of the ILO, and we are proud of the fact that, since the transition, we have accompanied Tunisia with humility and a sense of duty.

I welcome Tunisia's tripartite presence at this Conference, and recall the very courageous role played by the Tunisian General Union of Labour (UGTT) and the trade union movement in mobilizing for the revolution.

In such a diverse world, sir, you were right in saying that "being bicultural has the remarkable advantage of opening up the mind to see things in a more universal and relative way, with a sense of dialogue with others".

We are honoured to have you with us here to share your vision, and we thank you once again for being here with us today.

Original Arabic: Mr MARZOUKI (President of the Republic of Tunisia)

At the outset, I would like to congratulate the President on his election to preside over the work of this session; we wish him every success in guiding its deliberations.

On this occasion, I would also like to extend to Mr Juan Somavia my full recognition for his valuable efforts as head of this great Organization. I would like to pay tribute to him for his great work and the outstanding results achieved during his mandate, in the interest of the Organization, of all member States and of all workers.

I would also like to thank him for the encouraging words he addressed to me. I believe these words are addressed to all Tunisians who fight for democracy, and for human rights. This forum has welcomed them on several occasions when they came to ask for help and assistance, and we always received in this welcoming city, and in this Organization, all the necessary support in our struggle for democracy and freedom.

I would also like to congratulate Mr Guy Ryder on his election as the new Director-General, and wish him every success in carrying out his considerable tasks.

On behalf of the people of Tunisia, on behalf of the Government of Tunisia, and on my own behalf, I would like convey my profound gratitude to this great Organization for the honour it gives me today

and the welcome extended to me, which goes beyond myself, as it pays tribute to the Tunisian people whose uprising sparked off the Arab Spring.

Tunisia's relationship with the International Labour Organization goes back a long way, as we have been members of the ILO since our independence in 1956. Tunisia has adhered to the principles and values of the ILO, and especially to social justice, and ratified 58 Conventions, including the eight core Conventions related to fundamental rights.

The ILO was one of the first organizations to express solidarity with Tunisia after its revolution. It opened an office in Tunisia and participated in several initiatives on social dialogue, youth and women's employment and the development of priority regions.

In addition, in collaboration with the ILO and the Belgian Government, we organized a tripartite workshop which was held on 24 and 25 May 2012, to launch the social dialogue project and reach an agreement with the Tunisian General Union of Labour (UGTT) and the Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts in order to establish a Social Contract which would translate the commitment of the social partners to safeguarding peace and stability. This Contract will set down the conditions necessary for economic and social reform in response to the aims of the revolution and to the aspirations of the people of Tunisia. The Social Contract will be signed on 14 January 2013.

We firmly believe that this fruitful collaboration is only beginning. Today, we share, in words and in deed, the same values, the same dreams and the same projects.

The revolution, through free and transparent elections, has placed the responsibility, for the first time in 50 years, in the hands of the Tunisian people, who have struggled for decades for freedom and social justice. Today, our people are ready to collaborate with all honest persons both inside and outside Tunisia, as they have no other ambition but to serve the country and its citizens.

The revolution of our people against dictatorship erupted in the most neglected and marginalized regions before the towns and villages became involved, as everyone understood that eradicating corruption and tyranny was the only alternative to achieve a life in dignity.

We are seriously working on building the foundations of a democratic State. However, we realize that sweeping political reforms are not enough to build a promising future. We are fully aware that the main objective of our revolution continues to be decent work which safeguards dignity and allows citizens to practise their citizenship with dignity at work and in all their activities. Without decent work, democracy becomes a shallow concept which cannot feed the hungry or clothe the poor.

Our limited capacities and the economic crisis we are experiencing should not prevent the construction of the institutions of our incipient State, with employment as its priority.

It is true that the number of unemployed has practically doubled since the beginning of the revolution as investment, which requires a minimum amount of stability, came up against major difficulties which we are trying to overcome by strengthening institutions and ensuring security. In collaboration with the Tunisian General Union of Labour, to which I would like to pay tribute, we succeeded in

fighting precarious employment which was practiced in the guise of "subcontracting", by means of which all kinds of violations of workers' rights were committed.

Our main objective is to reach a level of development which does not run counter to the principle of social justice. We do not want a model of growth based on increasing figures or improving indicators to the detriment of human beings. Accordingly, after the revolution, the Government adopted several measures. With respect to improving workers' working conditions, for example, we have succeeded, in spite of the difficult economic crisis, in adopting specific measures such as providing help to enterprises which suffered from the events linked to the revolution or to farmers affected by natural disasters.

We have also ratified three international labour Conventions related to labour relations in the public service and to the promotion of collective bargaining.

I would like to mention a few of the measures we have adopted: first, the adoption of an economic and social reform programme, consisting of measures to encourage the various forms of employment; and the establishment of modalities for private investment focusing on development in the regions that lack infrastructure and services. I would like to highlight the efforts made by the employers in Tunisia, who work earnestly and seriously to achieve this form of social development. I commend and thank them, and call on them to work even harder so that Tunisia can belong to all its children.

Second, an increase in wages in 2011 was decided, which covers workers who earn the minimum wage in the industrial and agricultural sectors, as well as employees working in both branches of the public sector: the public service and public institutions and establishments.

Third, the Government raised the benefits granted to families in need, thus increasing the number of families receiving such benefits to 235,000.

Fourth, the Government announced, on the occasion of May Day 2012, after consultations with the trade union, that it would match the agricultural minimum wage to the industrial minimum wage and increased the rate.

One might say what has been achieved so far represents only part of the claims of workers and the social partners. However, it is a substantial part, if one considers the age of our revolution. We are not satisfied with this achievement, but we will continue to work to add to our achievements in the area of social dialogue. I would like to underscore here the concept of social consensus. Tunisia aims to build its democracy on the basis of political consensus among all parties. Moreover, it wishes to build peace and justice based on a wider social consensus between all parties. We are not fighting one another, as we need to build together. This requires that all the social partners accept one another. The alternative would be an endless war.

Our main objective is to achieve maximum social justice and build a model of sustainable development which would ensure the dignity of each citizen, and guarantee active citizenship.

We are currently giving serious thought to new means of ensuring social progress and providing employment to as many of our citizens as possible outside the traditional framework of classical liberalism. We would like to find other paths to sustain-

able development. Otherwise, we will remain prisoners of a system which seemed to distance itself from its normal role, and which will become a source of problems, not of solutions. We are aware of the need to review the development model adopted by our country, which was the underlying cause of the rise in the numbers of jobless and marginalized people, and the increasing weight of external debt.

In this context, we should learn from the experiences of other countries, especially those of Latin America, which succeeded in building their economies with their own capacities. We also need the assistance of international organizations including the International Labour Organization. This long-term task will require both time and effort. It will require the joint efforts of the Government, trade unions and capital. The difficulties we face today should prompt us to understand the aims we seek to achieve within the framework of a new social contract, as the basis for building democracy and new institutions. I would like to reiterate that democracy without social justice, just as social justice without democracy, cannot be sustained. We would like to build democracy through justice, and justice through democracy.

The events that occurred in Tunisia, and the events we are witnessing today in the Arab countries, send a clear message: that people will no longer accept poverty or marginalization, and that they will stand up for their right to a life in dignity. Corrupt minorities which governed with an iron fist in support of an unjust and abusive social system will no longer be able to control a situation that has become intolerable. There is a message within the message: There will be no peace among people in an unjust global economic system which creates a gap between the rich and poor. There is nothing between them except for oppressive apparatuses. Today, peace and justice go hand in hand. All the rest is temporary, and points to violence which will inevitably blow up one day.

I am aware that we all share the same values. We all belong to the same school of thought, to the same school of values. Today, we must shoulder our responsibility, especially in view of the limits of development as currently practiced, and old patterns of thought, and their impact within and between countries. The time has come for all of us to join our efforts so that workers' rights prevail – the rights of poor countries, as well as the right to sustainable development over ideologies that need to be revised. Let us work together and seize this historic occasion as embodied in the global economic crisis and the Arab revolution to reflect on a new development, and a new global economy. Let us work to ensure justice that guarantees peace, which is also necessary in order to attain justice.

A long and dangerous battle lies ahead, one which may be fraught with setbacks. However, the forces of life and hope shall never fail. This is our greatest consolation, and our greatest encouragement. We pray to God to guide us in our path to achieve the welfare of workers, people and all of humanity.

Original Spanish: The PRESIDENT

Thank you, Mr President, for your eloquent words and the account you have given of your personal experience in the fight for freedom and social justice.

We know that the ILO can count on you to bring hope to many millions of young people who, in your country in particular, are at the forefront of profound changes in social awareness.

As you have said, we must express to them our conviction that without them there cannot be a recovery in the world of work, because young people are the driving force for all reforms.

On behalf of my fellow Officers of the Conference and of all those present, and on my own behalf, I would once again like to convey our profound gratitude to you for having honoured us with your visit.

(The Conference adjourned at 11.25 a.m.)

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