Address of the Director-General
at a ceremony organized on the occasion of
Workers’ Memorial Day
- Monday, 29 April 2002 -

I thank all of you for being here today. I extend a particularly warm welcome to our guests from the emergency services in the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, France and Switzerland. Let me also welcome the representative of Public Services International and of the International Council of Nurses.

For emergency workers, who are the focus of our day, high risk and danger are their daily reality. They are ordinary people - the fire fighters, nurses, doctors, ambulance workers - who are called upon day after day to have the extraordinary courage to risk their lives to save others. Their work takes them to fires, earthquakes, floods and armed conflict from which others want to flee.

Some years ago the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions launched this Commemoration Day for workers who have died, who were injured or who fell ill because of work-related causes. It is now observed by trade unions in more than 100 countries. And at the ILO we lend it our strong support. I really appreciate that you have all made the effort to be here today. They work in the midst of physical and human distress. So thank you Brian Cleary and Keith Ruby - we know what you have been through. Thank you Olivier Légeret, Ros Harvey and Tesfamichael Ghebrehiwet.

We are dealing with real human loss and pain and injury. I believe that the more we become concerned, the more each of us examines what he or she can do, and the more of us who make the commitment to act, the better we will ensure that we have the capacity to address the problem.

Last year we organized our first ILO ceremony. It was a simple event bringing together our staff here at headquarters. This year we wanted to reach further out in a ceremony that is, indeed, about loss but one that is also about hope and what needs to be done in order to fulfil that hope.

It is about loss as we remember those who have lost their lives and their health because of their work.

But it is about hope because we are mobilizing to do better. Today provides a moment for reflection on how we can act, individually and collectively, to promote safety and health at work. It is the best tribute we can pay to those for whom it is too late.

The current figures speak of a human tragedy yet, time and again I feel that there is still not enough consciousness about it.

Some 2 million workers die each year from work-related accidents and diseases. That is 5,000 per day.
We estimate that, each year, workers suffer 250 million accidents of which 350,000 are fatal. Hazardous substances kill 340,000 workers each year. Asbestos used in the construction sector alone, claims about 100,000 of these lives.

An estimated 55,000 fatalities occur each year at construction sites around the world.

These are horrible figures. Yet the consciousness is still missing. Why? I think it is because most incidents are dispersed. The dramatic ones get reported in the press but the everyday reality of the many who die, fall ill or are injured from work-related causes is largely unseen. The different incidents manifest themselves as individual problems but together they are a social phenomenon.

At the ILO, we believe that the world has a moral obligation to act. We have seen the human cost of inaction. It also comes with an economic price - the loss in Gross Domestic Product resulting from this reality is 20 times greater than all official development assistance to developing countries. And enterprises and workers know that it adversely affects productivity.

Our studies show that where there is real social dialogue and community consciousness, risks to health and safety and exposure to hazards are reduced. And when workers and employers can organize freely and bargain, the situation dramatically improves. I believe these findings must be part of future strategies to promote occupational safety and health at work. We have major problems globally in agriculture, construction and mining.

Let us also not forget that safe work must be for all. Our programmes show the possibility of tackling safety and health issues in the micro enterprises of the informal economy. We have to recognize that increasingly, a lot of work goes on in the informal economy where the protection systems of the formal economy are often absent. We must be concerned about this and it is an issue that will be discussed at the International Labour Conference in June. The situation of workers in the informal economy must also be part of an effective and universal strategy on occupational safety and health.

I intend to work with our constituents to make this a day of action and prevention; to make this an international day FOR safety and health at the workplace. We have many tools - including a body of international labour standards and the ILO’s voluntary guidelines on occupational safety and health management systems. Let us use them still more effectively.

A number of governments have already adopted National Days in support of safety and health at work. I strongly encourage others to follow their example.

The ILO will act to mobilize the international community, and particularly other organizations in the UN system. But we must also ensure the best conditions for ILO workers themselves, an issue of strong concern to the Staff Union and I agree.

We have strong endorsement in the words of the Secretary-General when he tells us that "Safe Work is not only sound economic policy, it is a basic human right."
I cannot end without honouring emergency workers - your personal courage, the conviction that drives your commitment, the often voluntary nature of your service, of your determination to serve the community always in difficult and dangerous circumstances. But when I highlight your individual commitment, I cannot forget your families and what they feel when you are in difficulty. Thinking about occupational safety and health issues is also thinking about bringing a modicum of security to families. This is especially the case in high risk occupations - as those at home wonder whether family members will return from work.

In the name of the representatives of the workers, employers and governments of the ILO - and also, I know, in the name of millions throughout the world - thank you for being here and we all salute your courage.

Thank you.