CHEMICAL SAFETY IN THE SPOTLIGHT AS PRODUCTION, JOBS MIGRATE TO ASIA

Fourth Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety starts 1-7 November, UNCC, Bangkok

BANGKOK (ILO News) – Jobs in the chemical industries in East Asia have more than doubled over the last two decades, while the size of the workforce gradually declined throughout the sector in most regions of the world, according to a new report¹ from the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The report’s release coincides with ‘Chemical Safety in a Vulnerable World’, the Fourth Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS), which takes place at the United Nations Conference Centre (UNCC) during 1-7 November.

While the migration of production and jobs from developed nations to Asia and the Pacific can clearly offer economic benefits and opportunities, they must be accompanied by heightened awareness in the region on occupational health and safety (OSH) issues in order to minimize dangers for workers employed in the industry. According to the ILO, hazardous substances account for the death of 340,000 workers per year.

The report reveals that world employment in the production of industrial chemicals fell from a peak in 1994, slightly exceeding 9 million employees worldwide to 7.9 million in 1997. In contrast, employment increased in most parts of East Asia over the past two decades, growing from 2.4 million in 1980 to 6.1 million in 1995. China more than doubled its chemical employment over the last 20 years from about 1.8 million in 1980 to about 5.4 million in 1999. In contrast, employment in Europe slumped in five years from a peak in 1992 at about 1.9 million employees to about 1.2 million in 1997.

The ILO report on jobs in chemical industries is currently being discussed at a tripartite meeting in Geneva, which will review such issues as the balance between employment security and work flexibility, increased female participation in the workforce, training and skills development, stress and fatigue and industrial relations in the sector. The Geneva meeting is expected to adopt conclusions that include proposals for action by governments, employers' and workers' organizations and the ILO.

The report says that about 93 per cent of organized chemical workers in 42 major chemical producing countries worked less than 40 hours a week. Workers in Africa, Asia, Latin America and transition countries tend to work longer hours than European workers. In 2000, the average number of annual working hours was 2,040.8, ranging between 1,665 in Denmark and 2,808 in Thailand. Continuous shift work is an imperative in the chemical industries.
In April 2003, the ILO Regional Office in tandem with the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives held a seminar in Bangkok, kindly hosted by the Asian Workers Occupational Health and Safety Institute (OHSEI). This marked World Day for Safety and Health at Work and focussed on OSH and Agricultural Workers, covering hazards posed to untrained workers when using chemicals and pesticides.

Agriculture is one of three most hazardous sectors, according to an ILO report titled *Safety in Numbers*, both in industrialized and developing countries. Up to 170,000 agricultural workers are killed each year, so they run at least twice the risk of dying on the job than in other sectors.

The ILO believes that a strong "safety culture" is crucial - for workers, employers and government alike. The ILO's SafeWork programme is well placed to influence the global agenda. The ILO is the place where the world’s worker, employer and government representative meet on equal terms. It is currently campaigning for the provision of decent work worldwide. As the ILO Director-General Juan Somavia has stated, “decent work must be Safe Work, and we are a long way from achieving that goal”.

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² *Safety in Numbers* Pointers for a safety culture at work.

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