MEDIA ALERT

CHEMICAL SAFETY ‘A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ISSUE’

BANGKOK (ILO News) - A major objective of this week’s Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) meeting at the United Nations Conference Centre (UNCC) in Bangkok is to show that chemical safety is a sustainable development issue.

The goal of the 500 delegates attending will be to develop SAICM, introduced by the United Nations’ Environmental Programme (UNEP) last year and endorsed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, in August and September of 2002. The SAICM initiative will build on other international coordination mechanisms such as the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS), which finished its weeklong "Forum IV" meeting in Bangkok last week, and the Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals (IOMC), of which the ILO is a member.

The ILO is part of a broad partnership of UN agencies tasked with planning for the SAICM process. Previous UN achievements included a pesticides code of conduct, governing the field since 1996, and the Globally Harmonized System (GHS) of Chemical Classification and Labelling, approved in 2002.

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 ILO. 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.

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. Meanwhile, "global chemical sales have increased nine-fold since 1970 and will continue growing, with production shifting increasingly to developing countries," according to UNEP.

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 representatives 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”.

¹ Best practices in work flexibility schemes and their impact on the quality of working life in the chemical industries.
A recent ILO report called *Safety in numbers* revealed that some 440,000 fatalities per year in the workplace are caused by a lack of chemical safety.

**For further information, please contact:**

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*Please note that Mr Jukka Takala, Director of the ILO’s InFocus Programme on Safety and Health at Work and the Environment, is attending this week’s sessions on behalf of the ILO. Should you wish to find out more or arrange an interview, please contact Steve Thompson.*

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**Additional online resources**

The ILO’s InFocus Programme on Safety and Health at Work and the Environment  
SafeWork – Chemical Safety Resources  

ILO report *Safety in numbers* – Pointers for a global safety culture at work  

Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (UNEP)  

Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals (IOMC) web site  