

World Day on Safety and Health at Work  
"Decent Work, Safe Work"  
Seminar on Promoting Safe Development of Petroleum  
and Chemical Industries  
(Beijing, 28 April 2006)

Opening Speech by Ms. Constance Thomas,  
Director of ILO Office for China and Mongolia

Honourable Vice-Minster Liang Jiakun,

Dear Ladies and gentlemen, Good morning!

I am honored to be here today on behalf of the International Labour Office on the occasion of the World Day on Safety and Health at Work. I bring regards to you of Mr. Juan Somavia, Director-General of the ILO.

The theme of this year' World Day is Decent work and Safe Work. The ILO mandate is to promote decent work for all. This means to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. People want to be safe at work in the same way that they want work that is productive and delivers a fair income. They want security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration. Working people want to be able to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

Occupational safety and health is an integral part of the Decent Work Agenda. To be decent work must be safe work. It is therefore very fitting that the World, through national and local activities, have

a day to focus minds on the great importance of occupational safety and health. I appreciate that the State Administration of Work Safety (SAWS) has used this day and our joint event to -Promote Safe Development of Petroleum and Chemical Industries.

As we all know these industries are among the most important and growing industries worldwide. They are also in the spotlight of international attention. Oil and chemicals have provided enormous benefits to the world community, and are an indispensable part of daily life.

The chemical industry is the third largest in China, after textiles and machinery, and accounts for 10 per cent of the country's GDP. China's chemical industry is the second largest consumer, after the US, of basic chemical products--fully 45 % of the total for Asia.

However, while benefiting human beings, chemicals, especially hazardous chemicals, may constitute a great threat to occupational and public health and safety and to the environment. Sometimes they may cause serious consequences in the course of their production, handling, storage, transport as well as disposal or treatment of waste chemicals, if they are not properly managed, such as the Bhopal industrial disaster that happened 22 years ago in India and the Jilin chemical plant explosion occurred last November in China.

The ILO was one of the pioneering organisations in the United Nations system in the area of safeguarding workers' safety and health at work and making international industrial policies in relation to labour and social issues. As an organisation, the ILO brings together governments, employers and workers in common action to improve labour protection and conditions of life and work

throughout the world, mainly through its international standards setting and technical co-operation activities.

The ILO has adopted a large number of international labour standards in the area of OSH. Most relevant to today is Convention No.170 Concerning Safety in the Use of Chemicals at Work, which makes provisions on classification, labelling and Chemical Safety Data Sheets of hazardous chemicals used at work, and on the rights and responsibilities of governments, employers and workers concerned. We also have Convention 174 concerning prevention of major industrial accidents with the purpose of preventing such accidents involving hazardous substances and limiting the consequences of such accidents.

Also relevant to the topic of today is the Agenda 21 adopted at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. It outlines six programme areas for action to ensure environmentally sound management of chemicals. In response to the Agenda 21, the Inter-Organisation Programme for Sound Management of Chemicals (IOMC) was established with the participation of FAO, ILO, UNEP, UNIDO, WHO and OECD. Moreover, in 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg endorsed a Strategic Approach to International Chemicals management (SAICM). The engagement of all sectors of society is a key feature of this Strategic Approach.

Enhancing chemical safety must take account of a wide variety of different factors -- safety and health, the environment, agriculture, labour, industry and economic development. Policy coordination across sectors at national and international levels is essential to ensure effective management of chemical risks.

Given the inherent risks, the international chemical industries have realised that good safety and health is good business and OSH performance affects the bottom line of companies. Accordingly, the industries have initiated their voluntary programmes, such as a systems approach to health, safety and the environment (known as HSE) and Responsible Care, to address the performance of enterprises in respect of safety, health and the environment as well as other issues. Recently, we see more and more multinationals and national corporations paying attention to corporate social responsibility. We believe that safety and health can be an important part of these initiatives on the part of industries and companies.

However, it is always important for the chemical industries to comply with the national OSH laws, regulations and standards and to fully commit themselves to the principle of Safety First, Prevention Foremost. The industries' voluntary programmes should help implement the national laws, regulations and standards rather than replace them.

Ladies and gentlemen, with an industrialisation process in China, especially a rapid development of the oil and chemical industries, one of the challenges facing these industries is how to produce and use their products in a manner that is safe for the persons involved and for the environment. This is shown by the findings of a recent nationwide survey conducted by the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA). The survey found that China roughly has 21,000 chemical plants along its rivers or its coastline, and of these more than 50 percent are located along either the Yangtze or the Yellow River and that many of those chemical plants have lax safety standards with potential safety problems.

The Chinese Government has written the principle of safe and sustainable development into the 11th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China and attached the importance to safety and health at work in the chemical industry. In 1994, the National People's Congress of China ratified the ILO Chemicals Convention No.170 concerning safety in the use of chemicals at work.

In order to promote the implementation of the ILO Conventions, we are happy to support the work of the Government, trade unions and employers in the establishment of a national management system for chemical safety. Here I would like to draw your attention to the importance of also strengthening major industrial accident prevention in accordance with relevant ILO standards. It is now high time to place priority on the prevention of major hazards and to mitigate their possible impact brought by a rapid development of China's petrochemical industry in the recent years.

The adoption of a systems approach to chemical safety and prevention of major industrial accidents must involve the relevant government authorities, trade unions, employers' organizations, technical institutions and the petroleum and chemical industries. Without a close co-operation and commitment on the part of chemical enterprises, it is impossible for a country to establish a national system for sound chemicals management and safety. Therefore, it is important for international organisations, governments, industries and other relevant partners to make joint efforts to achieve our common goal that is to develop a prosperous, responsible, sustainable chemical industry to make our work and life more safe and healthy. Showcasing

good models of how this can be done, such as we are doing today, is very important.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the SAWS, especially its Work Safety Promotion and Education Centre, for your commitment and every effort to prepare for the today's events and to thank the events' supporter, Bacou Shanghai, and speakers for sharing your experiences with us. Last but not least, I would thank all participants, especially the friends from the media for your attention and support.

Remember, safety first, prevention foremost.