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Joint Press Release ILO/WHO Number of Work related Accidents and Illnesses Continues to Increase ILO and WHO Join in Call for Prevention Strategies

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GENEVA (ILO News) - Faced with a rising toll of occupational related death, injury and sickness, the International Labour Office (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) today mark the World Day for Safety and Health at Work by highlighting the need for a preventative safety culture worldwide.

According to new estimates by the ILO, the number of job related accidents and illnesses, which annually claim more than two million lives, appears to be rising because of rapid industrialization in some developing countries.

What's more, a new assessment of workplace accidents and illness indicates ([Note 1 >](#)) that the risk of occupational disease has become by far the most prevalent danger faced by people at their jobs - accounting for 1.7 million annual work related deaths and outpacing fatal accidents by four to one.

In its latest estimates, the ILO found that in addition to job related deaths, each year there are some 268 million non fatal workplace accidents in which the victims miss at least three days of work as a result, as well as 160 million new cases of work related illness. The ILO has previously estimated that workplace accidents and illness are responsible for the loss of some four per cent of the world's GDP in compensation and absence from work.

Broken down by region, the figures indicate that workplace accidents have levelled off in many industrialized and newly industrialized countries, while some countries now undergoing rapid development in Asia and Latin America are experiencing increases. For example, the ILO analysis showed that while the number of fatal and non fatal workplace accidents held steady or declined in most regions, in China the estimated number of fatal accidents rose from 73,500 in 1998 to 90,500 in 2001 ([Note 2 >](#)), while accidents causing three or more days absence from work increased from 56 million to 69 million. Meanwhile, in Latin America, a rise in the total number of persons employed and growth in the construction sector, particularly in Brazil and Mexico, appear to have led to an annual increase in fatal accidents from

29,500 to 39,500 over the same time period.

"This is happening because in the newly developing countries workers are often coming out of the rural areas, with few skills and very little training in safe work practices", says Jukka Takala, Director of the ILO's Safework Programme. "Most have never worked with heavy machinery, and some have little or no experience with industrial hazards such as electricity, so they don't know how dangerous these things can be. Yet these are elements of the kinds of jobs that are available for low skilled workers in rapidly industrializing countries."

"Once countries reach a more mature stage of development, there is a shift from construction to less dangerous service jobs and the accident rates begin to level off. We are seeing this now in South Korea, for example", Takala added.

The most common workplace illnesses are cancers from exposure to hazardous substances, musculoskeletal diseases, respiratory diseases, hearing loss, circulatory diseases and communicable diseases caused by exposure to pathogens. In many industrialized countries, where the number of deaths from work related accidents has been falling, deaths from occupational disease, notably asbestosis, is on the rise. Globally, asbestos alone is responsible for 100,000 occupational deaths per year. Meanwhile, in the agricultural sector, which employs half the world's workforce and is predominant in most underdeveloped countries, the use of pesticides causes some 70,000 poisoning deaths each year, and at least seven million cases of acute and long term non fatal illnesses, as stated in the assessment.

Improving the health of workers has led the ILO and WHO to cooperate closely on occupational safety and health issues. WHO helps countries to implement preventive strategies with a network of 70 Collaborating Centres, based on its Global Strategy on Occupation Health for All.

"Despite significant improvements in health and safety in many parts of the world over the past several decades, the global challenge of providing for worker health and safety is ever greater today", said Dr Kerstin Leitner, Assistant Director General for Healthy Environments and Sustainable Development at WHO. "Significant and more long lasting health gains could be achieved if greater emphasis were placed on effective policies and programmes for primary prevention. In many locations, particularly in developing countries, these are weak or virtually non existent. From a public health perspective, prevention through safety measures is better and also less expensive not only to workers individually, but to the society at large."

The three cornerstones of WHO's occupational health work focus on supporting the development and implementation of occupational health policies and action plans to countries in strengthening surveillance, estimating the occupational health burden and in developing "basic" national occupational health profiles. Another key role is to build capacity through a network of WHO Collaboration Centres in Occupational Health making current information on various risk factors (chemical, physical, ergonomic, psychosocial, biological, accidents) widely available. Finally, WHO defines a minimum package of occupational health services that each country should establish with a focus on primary prevention.

The ILO also cited new data showing that in the construction industry, at least 60,000 fatal workplace accidents occur each year worldwide - or about one death every 10 minutes. About 17 per cent of all fatal workplace accidents occur in this sector, while construction workers also face a number of health risks, including exposure to asbestos laden dusts, silica and hazardous chemicals. In line with ILO conventions, recommendations and guidelines, the report pinpoints the need for better planning and coordination with regard to addressing safety and health issues on construction sites, as well as a greater focus on reducing work related ill health and disease.

More generally, the ILO also predicted increases in the number of young people (age 15 to 24) and older people (age 60 and over) entering the workforce over the next 15 years, and warned that workers in these two age groups tend to suffer higher on the job accident rates. The report calls for the development of specially tailored accident and disease prevention programmes for workers in these two age groups.

Special World Day commemorative activities and events are expected in more than 100 countries. Both the ILO and WHO are committed to promoting and strengthening increased cooperation at the national level between ministries of labour and ministries of health as well as businesses, workers' organizations and other civil society stakeholders.

The link to World Day for Safety and Health at Work home page can be found online at www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/worldday/index.htm >

Further information can be found at www.ilo.org/safework >

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All WHO Press Releases, Fact Sheets and Features as well as other information on this subject can be obtained on Internet on the WHO home page: www.who.int > and www.who.int/occupational_health/en/ >

[Note 1](#) >

[Note 2](#) > - The most recent year for which figures are available.

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