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INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SECURITY ASSOCIATION
ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONALE DE LA SÉCURITÉ SOCIALE
ASOCIACIÓN INTERNACIONAL DE LA SEGURIDAD SOCIAL
INTERNATIONALE VEREINIGUNG FÜR SOZIALE SICHERHEIT

Opening of the XVIII World Congress on Safety and Health at Work

29 June 2008, Seoul, Republic of Korea

Speech delivered by the ISSA President

Mrs. Corazon de la Paz-Bernardo

Your Excellency, Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea
Your Excellency, Minister for Labour,
Your Excellency, President of the Korean Occupational Safety and Health Agency,

Ladies and gentlemen,
distinguished guests and colleagues,

It is an honour and my privilege to address you here today during this opening ceremony of the 18th World Congress on Safety and Health at Work. On behalf of the nearly 350 social security institutions in over 150 countries that comprise the membership of the International Social Security Association, I bring you greetings. It is with additional pleasure and personal satisfaction for me that this distinguished World Congress is taking place this year in East Asia, not far from my country, the Philippines.

I want to thank and express our deep appreciation to the Korean Occupational Safety and Health Agency and the Ministry of Labour for their tireless work in the organization of our congress and for making all of us feel so warmly welcomed in this spectacular capital city, Seoul.

The International Social Security Association and the International Labour Organization have been jointly organizing the “World Congress on Safety and Health at Work” since 1955. The world has changed dramatically since those first early congresses, especially through technological innovation and the process of globalization, but our organizations’ commitment to making Occupational Safety and Health a continuous worldwide priority issue is as fervent and passionate as ever. This commitment is not only reflected by this magnificent gathering of experts here today, but also in the multitude of programs and activities undertaken and sponsored by our two organizations throughout the year, all dedicated to making real progress on the ground wherever the safety of the workplace and the well-being of the worker are concerned.

There is no other event in the world of equal size or stature devoted to the critical issues of Safety and Health at Work as is this congress. There are almost 4000 national and international representatives and distinguished experts here today. It is therefore incumbent

upon us to use our standing and credibility to pro-actively promote and communicate our message to the world at large. And that message is that safety and health at work are both a basic human right and benefits not only workers but also companies and societies at large.

To contribute to this message, earlier today a high-level Safety and Health Summit took place, involving approximately 50 decision-makers from around the world, including government ministers, heads of social security institutions, CEOs of leading multinational companies, representatives of employers and workers and safety and health experts. The result of today's summit is the "Seoul Declaration on Safety and Health at Work", which will provide a new global reference point for addressing occupational safety and health issues around the world. Its aim is to stimulate political commitment to this important issue and demonstrate that good Occupational Safety and Health policies create a win-win situation for employers, workers and society at large.

Our challenge during the coming days is to move from words of declaration to actions, because today, more than ever, this is a dangerous world to work in. Every three minutes somewhere in the world a person dies as a consequence of lack of safety and health at work. Work claims more victims around the globe than does war. Over two million workers will die this year alone from work-related accidents and diseases. And with each individual death or disability, there are the tragic consequences for the family who, more often than not, have very little or no public support to lean on. In too many societies, it's a very short step from minimal survival to destitution.

Time is therefore of the essence, and we must act. Forty million people join the world's labour force each year, most of them in developing countries. An estimated 80% of the world's population is still working without adequate social security protection, let alone safe and healthy working conditions. The lines between formal and informal economies are constantly being blurred as international borders give way to integrated global networks.

And there are new and evolving challenges that must also be grappled with. The workforce of the future will be markedly older and more diverse, due to current migration trends. Women will make up an ever-increasing proportion of the global workforce. Around the world workers are being faced with new forms of precarious work, contract labour, and employment practices that conspire to negatively affect their health and safety at work. In addition to the distressing human cost is the full 4% of World Gross Domestic Product that is lost each year due to accidents and work-related diseases, so many of which could be prevented.

Globalization has brought about radical changes in the way goods and services are produced and delivered. But a by-product of globalization has all too often been a race towards higher productivity at a lower cost as the sole criteria, and industries are hastily set up, sometimes informally, to meet demand. In this environment, staying competitive often means sacrificing the quality of working conditions, where prevention and protection are seen as added cost. Of course, this is short sighted, but in a world where profit margins can be fractional, and you are only as good as your last quarter's earnings, long-term views are often hard to come by. It is our responsibility, here at this congress, to help show the way out of the vicious circle that does so much needless human damage.

While dramatic improvements in workers' safety and health have been made in industrialized countries, especially those with comprehensive social security systems, the more recent risks of psychosocial and musculoskeletal disorders, and other potential new risks such as nanotechnologies, just to name a few, have often replaced the old. New and adapted prevention strategies are now needed. And despite the progress that has been made, the traditional sectors of construction, mining, forestry and manufacturing still stubbornly present their hazards and risks to the safety and health of workers.

In developing countries the situation is even more challenging. According to international experts, over half of the world's occupational accidents occur in the Asia-Pacific region. This is hardly surprising when one considers the incredible economic boom that has been taking place in such countries as China, India, Thailand, or Vietnam. While trying to come to grips with traditional occupational risks, globalization has brought new and sometimes more hazardous industries to developing countries that are ill prepared or equipped to manage. Here, it is the worker on the frontline who pays the price, all too often with his or her life.

Safety and health law enforcement is insufficient in most developing countries. Where progress has been achieved at the legislative level, more must be done to implement it. What good are laws and decrees without teeth? Without true commitment and adequate tools to implement worker safety laws, there is only little or no effect on the workplace.

Ladies and gentlemen, a basic human principle, and the key objective of social security, is the preservation of the health of mankind. The theme of this congress reflects our conviction that Safety and Health at Work is a societal responsibility. That prevention is a nationally and internationally recognized factor in social security, and an integral part of its permanent mission, worldwide. How we treat our workers is a reflection of who we are.

Happily, we are not alone in this conviction anymore. It has taken time and much work on our part, but more and more employers, from "mid-size" to "large-caps", recognize that good worker relations and good occupational safety and health standards are essential to their long term survival and success. That effective health and safety management clearly helps reduce work-related accidents and ill-health. And that a healthy and safe workplace is interlinked with their standing in their company's image and reputation, or in other words, their competitiveness.

We are in a time of historic opportunity. Ten years ago the letters "CSR" meant almost nothing. Today, Corporate Social Responsibility is in the news and at the forefront. This is just the tip of the iceberg. As the world grows more and more aware of our fragile environment and the dangers posed by an unrestrained industrial approach to this planet, there is also an increasing awareness that human capital must be nurtured, preserved and cared for. The pursuit of economic targets, and safety and health protection in the workplace, are not mutually exclusive. One supports the other because, indeed, Prevention Pays! This is our credo at the ISSA.

For the International Social Security Association, any forward-looking social policy must

include at its core the prevention of risks. One cannot invest and nurture the development of human capital, which is the ISSA's mission through our Conceptual Framework of Dynamic Social Security, without focussing on prevention as a means towards an end, which is a healthier working population able to participate fully in their society and, with dignity, enjoy the fruits of their labour. It is through Dynamic Social Security that we can foster preventative and integrated responses, as well as encouraging the institutional partnerships necessary to meeting the ever-emerging challenges that we face.

We at the ISSA, through the continuous efforts of the Special Commission on Prevention, its 11 International Prevention Sections and other ISSA key structures, are committed to contributing to the promotion of concrete and comprehensive programs aimed at lessening the dangerous, and sometimes deadly, occupational risks faced by workers all over the world.

We applaud and enthusiastically welcome the outcome of today's Safety and Health at Work Summit as one important step towards the goal that we all seek. Now it is up to all of us here over the next 3 days to match lofty goals with our own actions. Employer and worker representatives, government, social security and safety and health experts: we are here to unite our energies and know how in a common effort to affect change in the lives of workers whose safety and health at work is our common mission.

I am confident that with the goodwill and expertise that have come from all over the world to share and participate in this important event, the successful outcome of this 18th Congress is assured and will make us all proud.

Thank you.