

Equipping construction sector to 01/08/02 *Island* minimise occupational hazards

Speech of the Minister of Labour
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In Sri Lanka out of the workforce of 6.2 million people 6.5% are employed in the Construction sector. According to the chamber of Construction Industries this sector employs directly or indirectly over a million people. As such the construction sector is a very important sector from the point of employment and infrastructure development. Of course, in the past few years we have seen a decline in this sector with hardly any massive development projects implemented in the country. The construction share of GDP dropped to 4% in 2002. But we are hopeful, with the ongoing peace process in Sri Lanka and the sound economic policies of the government, we expect very soon many infrastructure development projects to commence. This would include construction of roadways, bridges, dams, buildings, ports etc. This naturally would see a rapid growth in the construction sector as was seen during the post 1977 era and I believe would provide employment to a large number. However the construction industry has long been regarded as a hazardous sector with a high degree of accidents taking place.

There are some peculiarities in this sector that contribute to it being considered hazardous. Typical of construction is the mobility of operations. Worksites are started and terminated almost annually, if not monthly. The numbers of various occupational groups are high and numerous companies and contractors may operate at the same time on the same site. Each contractor or the sub contractor may be involved in one specific activity, like trenching, masonry, electrical, wood work, iron work or painting etc, at the same site. Different contractors may have different standards and workers with different background. The activities of one contractor may affect the workers of another contractor. Therefore safety and health in construction work has always been more difficult to organize than fixed site industries.

Construction industry consists of one of the most dangerous working activities. Many occupational hazards are simultaneously present at construction sites. Accident risks, dusts, noise vibration, radiation, chemicals and other hazardous materials, heavy physical work and ergonomic problems are common occupational hazards in construction sites. Most workers in the construction sector are migrant workers. Temporary, unhygienic living conditions, alcoholism and smoking, poor nutrition, separation from family for long periods, risks of sexually transmitted diseases are added problems in this sector.

The workers in this sector are unique in that they are mostly of the unskilled type. Their

education is poor and have hardly undergone any form of vocational training. This sector also employs a considerable proportion of women in unskilled work. The workforce is not permanent. They are paid on a daily basis and also may change the employer frequently. They are a migrant population moving from one worksite to another and from one employer to another frequently. They may also have any spells of unemployment. As a result of these peculiarities in employment, they are at higher risks of accidents and ill health.

The Human Resource of a country is the biggest asset. The onus of protecting the safety, health and welfare of workers in this country falls under the purview of my ministry. The Department of Labour under my ministry ensures social justice by setting and enforcing labour standards. Workers rights are protected by various laws by the Department of Labour. Safety, health and welfare of workers in the construction sector is protected by the provisions of the factories ordinance enforced by the factory inspectorate of the Department. This ordinance was enacted in 1942. Although it would have been very comprehensive and relevant to the problems that existed at that time, I am very well aware that this Act has not undergone changes to cater for the needs of the present day. The present safety and health law covers only the manufacturing sector and few of the other industries. I have therefore instructed the Commissioner General of Labour and my officials to update the health and safety laws in the country to suit the present day requirements. In fact very soon we intend to frame a national policy on safety and health and introduce a new Act that would cover the safety and health of all working people in the country.

In the year 1999, 10 out of 37 fatal accidents and 103 out of 2142 serious accidents reported to the Department of Labour were from the construction sector. Now these statistics do not show the exact situation of the construction sector nor does it really indicate the situation in other industries in the country, as it is we know that most industries do not report accidents to the department or labour although it is a legal requirement under the Factories Ordinance. In respect of non reporting of accidents we are well aware that sometime the small scale contractors do not even know that there is a legal instrument that covers the safety and health of workers in the construction sector. As a result we are not in a position to demonstrate the exact accident situation in this sector.

However considering the nature of work the hazards inherent to this type of work, and the background of the workers, one could expect a high incidence of occupational accidents and disease in this sector. We have got to know from the media of the many common fatal accidents from this sector, such as falls from heights and scaffolding, crushing under collapsing debris, death in confined spaces etc.

Considering the temporary nature of worksites and temporary status of workers, it is often difficult to enforce labour standards by a system of inspection by the authorities. As such, it would be the responsibility and the obligation of the employer to protect the workers' safety and health. However, the employer would not usually invest in anything of that would not bring in any profits. Sometimes the employer fails to see the long term benefit on investment in health and safety. Especially, in the small and medium scale construction sector, the employer is hard pressed for finances and as such may be driven towards

short term gains. It is important for the employer to realize that safety and health in the long run would indeed enhance productivity, efficiency and quality.

Even before assuming office as the Minister of Labour & Employment, I have always realized the importance of productivity and as such have taken steps to frame a national policy on productivity. Investment in safety and health would indeed reduce losses, and cutting on cost related to accidents and hence increase profits. Accidents are indeed very costly. Most employers fail to acknowledge this factor in the cost involved in possible accidents. Cost of treatment, cost of transport of victim, work stoppages following accidents, damage to machinery and construction, compensation, legal costs etc, could amount to a very high quantum. This is a loss, which would eat into the profits to decrease competitiveness. To the worker and his immediate family, the cost of the accident would be very high. Pain and suffering to the victim and family could never be quantified. Unlike therefore, today customers look not only at the quality of the product or service. They also seek the preservation of the health and life of the producers and as such look at sound issues such as exploitation of labour when choices, as well as environment issue. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the employer to ensure that working conditions are safe and healthy for workers.

I am happy to note that the ICTAD in their proposed activity plan has incorporated many positive measures for ensuring safety and health. Among them, I see inclusion of safety in the preparation of the BOQ and the safety requirements in the conditions of the contract. All this is commendable. The proposal to have officers at worksite and their training no doubt is a positive step in the right direction. I have in my Ministry experts in the field of occupational safety, occupational health and occupational hygiene, who will be ever willing to provide their services to ICTAD. We also have a relatively good information database from which you could obtain information on safety and health matters. Assuring you the best of services of my Ministry, I wish this seminar and your plan of activity, the very best.