

**Joint Statement for International Workers Memorial Day (2008)
BWI Affiliated Construction Unions in the Asia-Pacific Region**

“Jobs Should Provide Workers with a Living---Not Cause Deaths”

Every day workers in the building trades goes to work to make a decent living for their families but in the process, they face constant, unknown dangers that may result in bodily harm or sometimes, death. Each year 100,000 building worker dies due to work-related accidents. Furthermore, they are exposed to hazardous chemicals and substances such as asbestos that causes cancer. As we approach International Workers Memorial Day, everyone needs to be reminded of the dangerous and unsafe working conditions in which construction workers face every day. Because of this, it is important that we collectively work towards ensuring a safe work environment, so that jobs provide a living for workers rather than cause deaths.

Immediately after the New Year, 40 construction workers were killed when a fire broke out at a refrigeration warehouse facility in Icheon, South Korea. The majority of the workers died as a result of inhaling toxic gas that was released when the fire created a series of explosions from the numerous chemicals and toxic fluids, such as liquefied petroleum gas and paint thinner that were spread throughout the warehouse. Of the 40 workers nearly half were migrant workers who had come to South Korea seeking the “Korean Dream.”

“This tragic accident, which shocked the entire nation, proved once again that companies are more concerned about their balance sheet than ensuring a safe and healthy work environment for their workers,” stated Namkoong Hyun, President of the Korean Federation of Construction Industry Trade Union. He continued, “Internationally South Korea is considered to be a successfully developed country as evident by its membership to the OECD; however, the working conditions for construction workers in South Korea are similar to those of non-OECD countries. In June the South Korean government will host the World Safety and Health Congress. It is imperative that the government pushes for better safety standards at construction sites before it welcomes the international community to discuss health and safety. In doing this, the government will truly honour those who lost their lives in Icheon.”

Throughout the region construction workers are surrounded by toxic chemicals such as asbestos which is considered by many to be a silent killer. For many years, BWI affiliates have been active in the movement for a global ban on asbestos. Japan is one of 40 countries that have banned asbestos. “Asbestos is no longer used in construction sites across Japan; however this does not mean that we will stop in our commitment on the call for a global ban of asbestos. We pledge our support for other affiliates in the region such as the Associated Labour Unions of the Philippines as they work towards a ban of asbestos in their relevant countries.” stated Nobuo Kawada, Chair of

the Japanese Affiliates Council, BWI and the Vice-President of the Asia Pacific Region for BWI.

In the Philippines, the movement for a ban on asbestos has been rejuvenated by the recent Senatorial Bill 741 authored by Senator Miriam Santiago calling for the “Banning, Importation, Manufacture, Processing, or Distribution in Commerce of Asbestos-Containing Products” in the Philippines. Associated of Labour Unions (ALU), which has taken the lead to revitalize the ban asbestos campaign in the Philippines has begun to engage with the office of Senator Santiago and has also identified several possible members of the House of Representatives who may introduce similar bills in the Lower House.

According to Gerard Seno, National Vice-President of Operations for ALU, “We are extremely excited by these new developments as it signifies that we have a real chance to ban asbestos in the Philippines for good. We have a broad base of support here for this campaign and of course it helps that BWI affiliates are willing to share their experiences on how they were successful. Hopefully soon, Philippines will be the 41st country to ban asbestos.”

Clearly part of the campaign to ban asbestos is to stop the source of production. Despite the fact that experts ranging from medical professionals, scientists, to academics have proven the dangers of asbestos; companies producing asbestos have launched international marketing campaigns geared toward countries in the Asia Pacific region such as India and Indonesia stating that asbestos is safe.

“Although other countries such as China, Russia, and Brazil are big producers and exporters of asbestos, it is only the Canadian government has financially supported a massive advertising campaign in developing countries proclaiming the ‘safety’ of asbestos and unfortunately the Indonesian government seem to have bought into this lie,” stated Mr. Mudhofir, General Secretary of F-KUI. He continued, “Regardless of the efforts of the Canadian government, we are determined in our struggle to make sure that Indonesian workers do not pay with their lives so that asbestos-producing companies can financially prosper and live long and healthy lives.”

In addition to the campaign to ban asbestos, BWI affiliates in the Philippines are working to make sure that construction work sites comply to international safety standards. The recent accidents at the ship building facility operated by Hanjin Heavy Industries Cooperation (HHIC) Philippines in Subic has brought public attention to the need of construction sites to ensure the safety of its workers. Last month, on March 10th, another three workers died as a result of work-related accidents at Hanjin. Just two months earlier an explosion occurred at the ship building facility resulting gin the tragic death of two welders and injuring three others. An investigation found that the HHIC-Philippine was guilty of violating at least seven safety standards and ordered the company to comply to international standards.

The NUBCW has publicly expressed their outrage and concern about the safety of the workers at the Hanjin facility in Subic.

“Our sympathy goes to the families of the victims of this tragic accident,” stated Ernesto Arellano, President of NUBCW. He continued, “In the last five months, seven workers have died as a result of accidents at the Hanjin site. We also have heard from the workers and community that there is accident every day and it gets unnoticed, as it is not publicly reported. This is not acceptable. We will support these workers in their fight for their rights as workers and as human beings. We call on the HHIC-Philippines to ensure that OHS standards at the Subic facility meet international standards so that there are no more deaths at the site.”

This summer all eyes will be in Beijing as China hosts the 2008 Summer Olympics. In preparations for the Olympics, the Chinese government invested billions of dollars to ensure the quick construction of the numerous athletic facilities, stadiums, buildings, and hotels needed to accommodate the thousands of athletes and the millions of spectators, press and other officials who will be coming to China. Since construction began in 2003, at least 10 construction workers have been killed; however, the Chinese government has publicly stated that 6 workers have died. Accidents and deaths of construction workers during the construction of facilities for the Olympics are not new. This was the case in Athens, when Greece hosted the Summer Olympics in 2004 when 13 workers died as a result of round-the clock construction.

Although “Catch the Flame” Campaign, a global alliance of trade unions, NGOs, labour groups working towards publicizing the maltreatment and exploitation of workers in the merchandise industry of the Olympic Games in Beijing (2008), Vancouver (Winter 2010), and London (2012), construction unions will be highlighting the deaths of construction workers during the construction of facilities for the Olympics.

According to Sung Lung Tai, President of the Construction Site General Workers Union of Hong Kong, “The Catch the Flame campaign is focused on pressuring the sports wear companies, the International Olympics Committee, and government to take concrete steps to stop the abuse of workers in the global sporting goods industry but it is also important to utilize this campaign to highlight the exploitation of construction workers in the preparation for the Olympics.

Construction workers must work under dangerous conditions for long hours to ensure that all the buildings are completed in time for the Olympics. In the process many are injured and killed. The CSGWU is committed to raising the issue of safety during the construction of the athletic facilities for not only this year’s Olympics but all future Olympics.”

On April 28, more than one hundred unions affiliated to the Building and Wood Workers International are planning a series of activities and actions ranging from rallies to educational workshops and seminars, to press conferences, to distribution of materials to commemorate the

thousands of workers in the industries we represent who have been injured or died as a result of dirty and dangerous working conditions and exposure to hazardous substances and chemicals. We also wholeheartedly support the declaration adopted in Vienna at the BWI International Asbestos Conference in February, 2008, where representatives from construction trade unions from 33 countries, the International Union of Building and Wood Workers (UITBB), the International Social Security Association, the International Association of Labour Inspectors and the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat attended to discuss the hazards of asbestos and to reaffirm the commitment for a global ban on asbestos. We join these organizations' commitment to promote the global ban of all forms of asbestos from the construction industry and from all other industrial sectors; to promote the effective regulation of work with in-situ asbestos in demolition, conversion, renovation, and maintenance works by law; to work for the elimination of diseases caused by asbestos; to promote social justice for those affected by asbestos.

We, the construction unions within the Asia-Pacific region and affiliates of the Building and Wood Workers International, a Global Union Federation representing workers in the building, building materials, wood, forestry and allied sectors will honour those injured and died but more importantly we will continue to fight for the living.

Signatory Unions

Associated Labour Unions (Philippines)

Construction Site General Workers Union, HKCTU (Hong Kong)

F-KUI, KSBSI (Indonesia)

Japanese Affiliates Council, BWI (Japan)

Korean Federation of Construction Industry Trade Union, KCTU (South Korea)

Mixer Truck Drivers Association, HKCTU (Hong Kong)

National Federation of Labour (Philippines)

National Union of Building and Construction Workers (Philippines)

National Federation of Chinese Construction Workers Union (Taiwan)