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Speech by Mr Gan Kim Yong, Minister for Manpower, at the Launch of the National Workplace Safety and Health Campaign, 29 April 2010, 12.00 pm, Suntec City Tropics Atrium

Mr Lee Tzu Yang, Chairman, Workplace Safety and Health Council

Mr John de Payva, President, National Trades Union Congress

Mr Landis W. Hicks, Vice President, Singapore National Employers Federation

Industry leaders
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

INTRODUCTION

Good Afternoon,

I am pleased to join you this afternoon at the launch of the National Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Campaign 2010.

2. Let me first thank you for the support since 2005 when my Ministry revamped the WSH framework. While we have seen significant gains in our WSH performance since, the considerable improvements in the earlier years of 2004 to 2007 appear to have hit a plateau in the last two years.

3. While we have put the fundamentals in place, we need to redouble our efforts to bring more industry players on board so that we can attain world class standards. In key sectors such as construction and marine, we will need to focus on the main weaknesses that still exist and improve the effectiveness of our efforts. For example, MOM and the WSH Council have recently announced our concerted drive to address fatal falls and crane incidents in the high risk industries.

4. At the same time, we will need to move beyond our current areas of focus to extend the outreach of our WSH efforts on two new fronts. First, we will reach out to include every single workplace in Singapore when we extend the WSH Act to cover all workplaces by September 2011. This includes retail, entertainment and services sectors that employ 46% of our workforce. Second, we will tackle the increasingly important issue of workplace health.

RELEVANCE OF WORKPLACE SAFETY AND HEALTH TO ALL STAKEHOLDERS

5. I will first elaborate on our intent to reach out to extend the

WSH Act to cover all workplaces. This is an important step to achieve our vision of a safe and healthy workplace for everyone. It reflects our belief that all of us have a right to work in a safe and healthy work environment, regardless of the industries we are in. Like their counterparts in the higher risk sectors, employees in the new sectors are also susceptible to WSH hazards. Our 2009 statistics show that these sectors contribute to 29% of all work injuries. They also contribute to 6% of fatalities - four employees died while on the job. To these victims and their families, this is four too many.

6. Let me share with you some incidents. In 2008, a manager working in a freight services company slipped while supervising the collection of goods and fractured his wrist. He suffered 7% permanent incapacity, receiving about \$12,600 in work injury compensation alone. As the manager was on medical leave for more than 60 days, the company's productivity was also affected. In a more serious incident last year, a cleaner slipped and fell near a housing estate's rubbish chute he was cleaning. He later died in the hospital from a fractured skull sustained from the fall.

7. Such accidents could have been avoided and lives could have been saved, if employers have a better understanding on the common WSH hazards and take appropriate preventive measures to mitigate risks posed to their employees. We must put in our best efforts to prevent each and every of these incidents by raising WSH standards in these workplaces to better protect employees.

Preparing our stakeholders

8. The extension of the WSH Act will cover another 140,000 establishments¹. Given the large size, diverse profile as well as general lower WSH awareness amongst the new sectors, employers from these establishments will need help to better understand basic WSH obligations and responsibilities. We will be sending each employer a special informational package within the next few months. There will also be forums and roadshows to help employers understand the common WSH hazards in their own sectors and how to implement risk management. As a start, the WSH Council is producing a "Guidebook on common hazards and control measures". The draft Guidebook has been put up for public consultation on the WSH Council's new iWSH portal. The final copy will be sent to all the employers.

9. For the 1.4 million employees who stand to benefit from the extended coverage of the WSH Act, we will step up our efforts to build awareness on their rights to a safe and healthy environment. Starting from today, the WSH Council will launch a nation-wide campaign to target the general workforce, focusing

on common work hazards in all workplaces. You can see some of the educational materials at the exhibits here today. There will be road shows and a national advertising campaign to raise employees' awareness on WSH issues and help them understand their role.

IMPORTANCE OF MANAGING WORKPLACE HEALTH ISSUES

10. While we extend the WSH Act to cover all workplaces, we will need to also strengthen workplace health standards. There is an increasingly strong economic case to adopt a comprehensive and holistic approach on workplace health. In a study conducted by the Health and Safety Executive in Britain, the cost of workplace health problems outstrips that of workplace safety issues. In the United Kingdom, work-related illnesses cost employers up to an equivalent of S\$4.2 billion a year. This is about S\$1.7 billion higher than the estimate for work-related injuries². The significant economic impact of work-related health issues shows that we should not neglect these issues. .

11. However, tackling workplace health issue is a challenge. Lapses in the management of workplace safety issues have an immediate and tangible impact in terms of injuries and fatalities. The impact of failure in workplace health management is more insidious, although it is no less severe than those stemming from workplace safety lapses. Therefore, it is critical that employers recognise this and take proactive measures to improve the management of workplace health hazards.

12. To address this, I am pleased to launch a new workplace health strategy today to raise workplace health standards in both the traditional sectors and the new ones. This will complement our national WSH strategy, WSH 2018, and accelerate our progress towards achieving better outcomes in both areas of workplace safety and workplace health. Our new strategy has outlined three key initiatives.

Step up capability building and compliance assistance efforts to reduce occupational disease incidence

13. First, we will be implementing targeted intervention programmes to reduce the incidence of occupational diseases in Singapore. For example, noise induced deafness continues to be a key area of concern. In 2009, it contributed to 81% of all occupational diseases. Our enforcement efforts revealed that these workplaces failed to conduct noise monitoring and employees failed to use appropriate hearing protectors. To address these issues and to improve our monitoring and surveillance efforts, we intend to amend the Noise Management regulations to cover more workplaces. We will also continue to engage workplaces to implement hearing conservation programmes in noisy workplaces through our noise-induced

deafness prevention programme (NIDPP).

Addressing under-reporting of occupational diseases

14. Second, we will be stepping up engagement with employers and medical professionals to address the under-reporting of occupational diseases. A new "Guidelines on occupational diseases" will be published by the WSH Council later this year to raise awareness of such diseases and their reporting requirements.

Increasing inter-agency efforts to strengthen workplace health efforts

15. Third, the broad nature of workplace health issues such as office ergonomics and indoor air quality requires the government to adopt an inter-agency approach. MOM and the WSH Council will work closely with the Health Promotion Board to encourage employers to implement effective workplace health programmes. For a start, we are working on the joint development of a *Code of Practice on Workplace Health Promotion*.

CONCLUSION

16. Sustained improvements in WSH require strong commitment from all stakeholders. This year's campaign slogan "Safety is in My Hand" reminds each and every stakeholder of his role in ensuring safety at work. Today also marks the start of a series of efforts to raise overall awareness of WSH and to bring more employers and employees on board. To ensure workplace safety and health, it has to be at the top of our minds at all times. Hence, our efforts will extend beyond the national campaign and will cover different WSH topics and reach out across various sectors.

17. I urge everyone - employers, employees, and key partners - to lend your support to our national initiatives. I am confident that, with your commitment, we can achieve our WSH 2018 goals and more. Thank you.

¹Based on estimates from the Department of Statistics, 2007

²<http://www.hse.gov.uk/economics/research/injuryill0506.pdf>

 [Fact sheet on new Workplace Health strategy for Singapore](#)

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