

**Opening Remarks of the Meeting of Labour Ministers of SAARC Countries on HIV/AIDS
Mr. Oscar Fernandes, Hon'ble Minister of State for Labour & Employment**

HIV/AIDS is not a health issue alone. It is a much wider and a far deeper issue. It is a development issue at one level and a human right issue on another. It is a challenge that has several faces. Studies have proved that the epidemic largely affects the population in 15-49 years age group. This age group, which is in the prime of productive and sexually active life, also happens to be the potential working age group. According to ILO estimates of the total people affected with HIV/AIDS, ninety percent are in the age group of 15-49. As the majority of those who die of AIDS are adults in their productive prime there is a direct effect of HIV/AIDS on the labour force composition.

There are examples of many African countries where the working population has been wiped out by the epidemic and a thin pillar of adults has remained to support a much larger young and old population. There has been a growing concern for the depletion of human resources as many of those infected with HIV are experienced and skilled workers. Besides this, the deaths caused by AIDS have caused another serious problem, that of increasing child labour. According to a World Bank report (2002), there are an estimated 13 million children orphaned by AIDS worldwide. By 2010, it is feared that there would be 35 million children orphaned by the epidemic. The orphaned children are forced to leave their education and become child labour, often into exploitative and extremely hazardous forms of work.

The high drop out rates from schools will further lower the qualifications and skill level of the workforce. This in turn will have a negative impact on productivity. Thus the pandemic has profound impact on the economy, the workforce, the business, individual workers and their families in the most affected countries. It creates loss to labour through loss of jobs and income, loss to the industry through increased health expenditure, absenteeism, replacement and training costs, death related costs and loss in terms of shortage of skilled labour and

adverse effects on output and productivity. In countries and communities where HIV/AIDS is most concentrated, the consequences of the epidemic are felt by households, public and private sectors and the national economies. Enterprises in many countries report increase in absenteeism, staff turnover and cost of recruitment and training, besides manifold increase in health expenditure.

Impact of HIV/AIDS in Asia:

There are three crucial reasons why HIV/AIDS is an important workplace issue in Asia. These are:

1. HIV infections mostly occur in productive people in the age group of 15-49.
2. Transmission of HIV is increasing in Asia: as the numbers of HIV-positive workers and consumers increase, all business will be affected.
3. Lack of awareness and understanding of HIV, resulting in fear and negative attitudes among employees and managers, can cause workplace conflict as well as stigmatization, discrimination and mismanagement of HIV-positive employees.

Some of the negative impacts of the pandemic in terms of workplace and workers are:

- Reduced labour supply
- Loss of skilled and experienced workers
- Stigma and discrimination at the workplace
- Reduced productivity and increased labour costs
- Reduced family income and increased burden of care, especially for women
- Food security threatened
- Negative impact on economic growth– weakening the tax base, lowering demand, discouraging investment
- Disruption of education and the informal transfer of skills

In order to effectively deal with the problem of HIV/AIDS at the workplace, ILO has developed a Code of Practices. The objectives of the Code is to provide a

set of guidelines to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the world of work within the framework of decent work. HIV/AIDS workplace management requires the advocacy and implementation of:

- (1) company policies,
- (2) educational programmes, and
- (3) reasonable care and support provisions to help HIV-positive workers.

Indian context

India had an estimated 5.7 million People Living With HIV/AIDS (PLHA) at the end of 2006. This makes India home to more than fourteen percent of the global population of PLHA. India is second in the world, only after South Africa, in terms of the absolute number of People Living with HIV/AIDS.

In India, the risk of working population is evident from the fact that nearly 90% infections in India have been reported from the most productive age group (15-49 years). Moreover, of the total 400 million people who belong to the workforce, more than 93 percent belong to the informal sector where there is no formal protection.

It is for this reason, the Ministry of Labour along with ILO has been implementing a project on prevention of HIV/AIDS in the world of work by involving some of its key institutions such as V.V. Giri National Labour Institute (VVGNI), which is involved in research, training, education, publication and consultancy on labour related issues, Central Board of Workers Education (CBWE) which is primarily engaged in imparting education to workers in the organized and unorganized sector throughout the country, Employees State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) which is an integrated social scheme to provide protection to workers and their dependents in the organized sector. Under this programme, effort has been made in consultation with tripartite constituents (Government, Employers' organizations and Workers' organization) and the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), to develop a three-phased programme, aimed at

establishing a sustainable national action on HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support in the world of work. The development objective is to prevent HIV/AIDS in the world of work, enhance workplace protection and reduce its adverse consequences on social, labour and economic development.

However, no intervention is adequate unless a national policy is formulated to provide legal protection. I have no doubt that, with the participation of so many luminaries in the field, this meeting will be marked by focused and meaningful discussions leading to formulation of a definitive national policy aimed at protecting the rights of workers who are infected with HIV.