

ADDRESS BY ANDREW KAILEMBO, General Secretary, International Confederation of Free Trade Union – African Regional Organisation (ICFTU- AFRO)

15 January 2006



Our Co-chairpersons: Mr. Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of UNEP and Mr. Jim Baker, Director of ILO/ACTRAV
Representatives of various Governments present here
President of the ICFTU
General Secretary of the ICFTU
General Secretary of the WCL
Vice Chair of Global Unions Federations
Environmental Activists
Distinguished Invited Guests
Participants

Sisters and Brothers: On behalf of the 15 million members of the ICFTU-African Regional Organisation, and on my own personal behalf, I wish to sincerely thank the organisers for their invitation, and the opportunity to address this assembly, being held on the theme "labour and the environment." We are particularly delighted over the organisers' goodwill, in inviting a good number of participants from our affiliates, and other trade union organisations from across the world, to take part in this all-important assembly. This initiative gives us the hope that a broader picture has come into view, which shows that workers are not alone, but that we are part of a global movement that is determined to provide an alternative policy framework, to achieve decent jobs for all within a sustainable environment.

Workers' interests have often been viewed to conflict with those wishing to protect the environment. This assertion is firmly rooted in the parochial argument that economic development, expansion of production, and increased employment are the major causes of environmental degradation. On the contrary, much environmental damages - be it radiation leakages from nuclear power plants, asbestos poisoning, polluted air or water, often disproportionately affect workers in industries and their communities. They are often the first victims of these environmental risks or hazards. Little wonder why workers as social agents at the forefront of the population chain are determined, through the decent work agenda, to make a positive difference in the preservation and restoration of the environment.

Our existence is becoming more and more endangered if we continue our impact on the environment in a manner to show that there is no tomorrow. For this reason alone, it is common sense for us to close our ranks, pull our energies together, and revitalise our resolve in the struggle for the protection of a resource-rich and healthy environment for the unborn generations and us all. The fisheries, forests, fossil fuel and other mineral deposits in Africa and elsewhere, are being exploited at unprecedented and unsustainable rates in order to support the global economy. At the current pace of this exploitation, we will need about eight planets to meet the resource requirement of the 10 billion people that are estimated to live in 2050. This is also based on the assumption that every body will be consuming at the same rate that the people living in the North do now. The assumption is that at this rate of consumption, the ecosystem will continue to decline in both quantity and quality, with dire consequences for humanity.

For instance, the knock-on effects for health, habitats and the stability of the climate, due to increased mobility of goods and services often accompanied by massive expansion of road and air transportation network, has compounded the problem of air pollution, which now claims the lives of nearly three million people worldwide per annum.

As we meet here today, UNEP has already acknowledged and confirmed that 2005 recorded the world's largest financial losses ever, in the region of US\$200 billion, as a result of weather-related natural disasters. Major tropical storms in the Atlantic and Pacific have increased in duration and intensity by 50 per cent since the 1970s. The highest ever rainfall in India's

history occurred in 2005, which left hundreds of people dead in its wake in the ensuing flooding.

It is becoming apparent from these gloomy statistics that the world is moving from the days of predictions of the likely impacts of climate change to proof that it is already fully underway. The vulnerability of people and communities everywhere has increased on an unprecedented scale as a result of our abusive impact on the climate, which has compounded the problem of weather-related disasters.

Solid waste management is another growing environmental problem now plaguing most African countries. This is largely as a result of population pressure and the lack there off, of adequate and appropriate logistics for efficient domestic wastes disposal. Consequently, the piles of garbage have become the ideal breeding grounds for dreadful, communicable, and epidemic killer diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever. The health budgets of poor families, who often live in slums near such eyesore places, have been over-stretched and their numbers are fast been eroded due to deaths resulting from these illnesses.

Most working environment today in the African region are no different, especially with the emergent of sweatshops in the so-called AGOA-driven Export Processing Zones. The problem of heat, vibration, radiation, smoke, fumes, dust, poisonous gases, radioactive substances, fumigants, corrosives, oil spills and other harsh chemicals; poor ventilation and workers' lack of access to adequate toilet facilities and drinking water, is on the increase in industries and factories, especially in those that are operated under the EPZ regime. These unacceptable slave-like conditions are causing many deaths on the job in the region.

Health services and facilities in most African countries are grossly under-resourced and ill equipped. The deplorable and appalling health facilities have increased the vulnerability of health personnel who work in and handle patients under very precarious and unhygienic conditions without the use of proper personal protective equipment. This unfortunate situation is increasing the number of reported cases of health workers that are contracting diseases in the discharge of their duties.

Farm workers and local communities are also facing dangers with increase in the improper use of harmful agric-chemicals such as pesticides, weed killers and chemical fertilizers. The use of CFC is a case in point. Often than not, farm workers due to their limited education and training background hardly follow manufacturers instructions and procedures on how to ensure the safe of use these agri-chemicals. For instance, warning signposts are rarely erected to inform the public on the need to keep-off from farms that have been newly sprayed. Besides the farm workers themselves sometimes do not put on personal protective equipment when using these dangerous chemicals. The poor timing of the use of these chemicals also sometimes lead to situations in which these substances get drifted by strong winds across communities or washed away into water bodies and cause harm to unintended targets. Poor statistical compilation makes it difficult however to ascertain the magnitude of such damages but these occurrences and their effects are real.

This 3-day meeting, I hope will help us to cement our newfound unity and to intensify the struggle against the raging man-made environmental disasters, which are principally the outcome of the rampant expansion of the market economy. In this forward march, we should organise and strategise, debate and decide our courses of action, aimed at re-directing the world towards the path of sound and sustainable environment-friendly development. On this note, it is once again my pleasure to thank the organisers, and to wish this conference a great success. Thank you for your attention.