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**SPEECH BY MR GOH CHEE WEE, MINISTER OF STATE
(TRADE & INDUSTRY) AND (LABOUR),
AT THE MINISTRY OF LABOUR'S ANNUAL SAFETY PERFORMANCE AWARDS
PRESENTATION CEREMONY AT THE STAMFORD BALLROOM,
WESTIN HOTEL ON THURSDAY, 25 NOVEMBER 1993 AT 7.30 PM**

I am happy to be here at this presentation ceremony for the Ministry of Labour's Annual Safety Performance Awards. Tonight, a total of 71 companies will receive awards and certificates which are presented in recognition of their outstanding achievements in accident prevention at the workplace. I commend all award winning companies for their dedicated efforts in promoting the safety and health of their workers.

To qualify for the Ministry's Safety Performance Awards, all applicants must meet a set of demanding criteria. They are also subject to close scrutiny of the judges from the Singapore National Employers Federation, the Singapore Manufacturers' Association, the Singapore Contractors Association, the National Trades Union Congress and the Ministry of Labour. Tonight we see the largest ever number of award recipients. I was told that the standard of safety management amongst the companies which apply for the awards has generally improved. In fact, four companies have performed so well that they win the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Excellence Award. This is a new award introduced by the Ministry to give special recognition to companies which managed to win the Gold Award for the third consecutive year. The OSH Excellence Award is also intended to provide the incentive for companies that have won the Gold Award to keep up their good safety record.

Another feature of the safety award scheme is that the Ministry does not limit the number of awards that can be won by

companies. Companies therefore need not compete to win at the expense of the others. As long as a company satisfies the conditions for the award, it will be eligible for one. Such a scheme provides motivation to companies to co-operate with one another in promoting the safety and health of their employees. It is in this cooperative spirit that they are prepared to share their winning formulas, helping each other to improve. For instance, last year, all Gold Award companies accepted without hesitation the Ministry's invitations for them to share their experiences at the workshops. The workshops were organised to enable other companies to learn from the experience of the award winners. In this way, we hope to further improve the safety record of our industry as a whole.

Last year, the number of accidents reported to the Department of Industrial Safety (DIS) was 4,698. This is 8.8 per cent lower than in 1991. The accident frequency rate which is the number of accidents per million manhours worked also decreased by 10 per cent from 4.0 in 1991 to 3.6 last year. For the first nine months of this year, the number of accidents reported to the DIS was 3,169. This is 12.3 per cent lower than the corresponding figures recorded last year. Preliminary figures also show that the overall accident frequency rate for the nine-month period had fallen to 3.3.

Notwithstanding these improvements, many serious accidents still happen. This is of great concern, especially in the shipbuilding and repairing industry where they have caused multiple deaths. Last year, 25 workers were killed in 13 fatal accidents in shipyards. The most serious were the "Stolt Spur" and "Indiana" accidents. The Committees of Inquiry appointed to inquire into these accidents had made several recommendations to prevent similar accidents as well as to further improve safety in shipyards. The Ministry is working towards making these recommendations mandatory in the form of a set of regulations for the shipyards.

Investigations of industrial accidents in various industries reveal that human errors and ignorance are the common causes of many of the accidents. Let me give you two such examples. In one accident, a worker put on an air-fed mask before entering an engine room to do some cleaning work. He had inadvertently connected the hose of the air-fed mask to a nitrogen cylinder instead of an air cylinder. As a result the worker was asphyxiated by inhalation of nitrogen. In another case, a worker accidentally stored hydrochloric acid in a container which usually contained hydrogen peroxide. Another worker used this container to top up a hydrogen peroxide tank. This resulted in chemical reaction which produced chlorine gas. The gas affected several workers in the vicinity, causing them to suffer upper respiratory tract and eye irritation.

Such accidents underline the importance of providing proper training to workers so that they are able to identify and recognise hazards related to their work and understand the safe working procedures.

Employers must also send their managers, supervisors and workers to attend formal safety training and orientation courses so that they can be better informed of their respective roles and responsibilities to ensure that work is carried out with due regard to safety. Last year, more than 38,000 persons attended the various courses conducted by Labour Ministry's Occupational Safety and Health (Training and Promotion) Centre. This is an increase of 23.4 per cent as compared to 1991. The bulk of the trainees were from the construction, and the shipbuilding and repairing industries. These courses help to raise workers' awareness to hazards, shape their attitude towards safety and make them less prone to taking risks that would endanger the lives of their own or their colleagues'. For this reason, the Ministry takes a serious view of workers, who, despite reminders, fail to attend the course. This year, 84 foreign workers from 40 companies had their work permits revoked for failure to attend the courses.

Improving safety is everybody's business. It would be wrong to think that the responsibility for ensuring safety at the workplace only lies with the safety department of the company. Unfortunately, many of the companies today still look upon the management of safety as a staff function. Such an arrangement can be likened to a ridiculous situation of leaving the responsibility of the company's profitability solely to the sales or finance department. Safety, just like profitability, is a line responsibility. This means that senior managers, line managers, supervisors and the workers themselves should all be held accountable for safety and health at the workplace, with the chief executive officer being overall responsible.

To stress the importance of safety as a line function, it is adopted as a key criterion in determining the Ministry's Safety Performance Awards. It should therefore come as no surprise that all OSH Excellence and Gold Awards winning companies practise safety as a line function.

Finally let me once again congratulate all award winners. Keep up your good work. I wish you all a pleasant and enjoyable evening.

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