

Govt urged to announce special fund for factory workers, daily-wage earners

Leaders of an alliance of trade unions on Tuesday expressed serious concern over impending financial losses to workers, especially to daily-wage earners, due to closure of factories, marketplaces or restrictions on gatherings on account of fear of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the country.

The National Labour Council (NLC), a representative body of workers, organised a press conference at the Karachi Press Club, where its leaders demanded of the government to constitute a task force to determine the financial losses to industries and companies and find solutions to ensure the rights of workers were protected.

NLC members, including Habibuddin Junaidi, Zulfiqar Shah, Nasir Mansoor, Liaquat Sahi Farhat Parveen, Zehra Khan and Hussain Badshah, urged the government to constitute a Special Support Fund so that in case of closure of the factory or business, it could guarantee the provision of income to the workers as the majority of the workers were working in the informal sector or under the contract system.

They also demanded that workplaces needed to be properly screened and sterilised to save the lives of workers from contacting the deadly virus.

Some exporting countries had reportedly asked Pakistani manufacturers to halt their productions due to lockdowns in different countries in Europe, the speakers said, adding that some factories had been asked to delay their export shipments as shopping centers and departmental stores in many European countries had been closed.

Pakistan is the main exporter of textile garments to European countries. Under the Generalised Scheme of Preference (GSP) Plus scheme, Pakistani exporters are enjoying duty-free exports to European markets. The EU has further extended the GSP-Plus facility to Pakistani exporters for the next two years after its third review in January 2020.

The labour leaders underlined the need to have close coordination among all the provinces and federal government departments to face this natural calamity, which has affected every section of the society. Daily-wage workers would suffer a lot in the wake of the closure of industries, the labour leaders stated. They pointed out that work at many factories in different industrial areas in the city had been halted or restricted due to the coronavirus threat.

The workers demanded of the government to arrange the provision of essential items, including food, to the poor and low-income people.

They welcomed the holding of a video conference by the heads of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) member countries on how to tackle the coronavirus threat on Sunday and appreciated the decisions made by all the regional countries.

Special Assistant to Prime Minister on Health Zafar Mirza represented Pakistan in the conference and highlighted Pakistan's approaches and responses to the pandemic. Mirza underscored the need to empower and mandate the Saarc Secretariat to act as a platform for regional efforts to combat the disease.

The Pakistani labour leaders demanded that the much-delayed Summit of Saarc should be held as soon as possible in Pakistan, as this is the right time to meet and discuss pressing issues of the region. The last summit was held in Kathmandu in 2014 and it was scheduled to be held in Islamabad in 2016, but due to India's refusal to take part it was postponed.

The labour demanded that to meet the challenge of coronavirus, the Saarc governments must pool the resources for the wellbeing of their people instead of spending their valuable revenues on the purchase of weapons. The Saarc Summit should seriously consider signing a South Asia Regional Peace Pact to stop wars in the region and settle mutual disputes according to Saarc Charter.