

Farm workers exposed to alarming array of perils – ILO official

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THE NATION

THE GOVERNMENT should create greater awareness, clearer policy and disseminate more information about occupational hazards among agricultural workers, an expert at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) said yesterday.

Tsuyoshi Kawakami, the ILO's occupational safety and health specialist, said the problem in Thailand's agricultural industry is alarming, and although it's not visible the risks involved are as high as those in the mining and construction industries.

Hazards from chemical pesticides, new complicated machinery

and incorrect treatment of problems such as back-pain are taking its toll on Thai agricultural workers, with 2,514 hospitalised and 10 deaths last year. Kawakami believes many more cases go unreported as farmers simply did not go to hospital to seek help.

He added that many migrant workers are doubly compromised

because they often have little Thai language and virtually no access to preventive welfare.

"People who use chemicals need to be given information," said Phil Drew, director of the Asian Workers Institute for Occupational Health, Safety and Environment.

Chankaew Korngchai, a farmers' representative from Chiang Mai,

said many workers in the province's Mae-ai district are being affected by the large amount of pesticides being used on nearby orange farms.

Chankaew said he and many others had dangerous levels of toxic chemicals in their blood and that their water sources are being contaminated from activities on the farms.

"We can no longer stay on our land. Big farm operators from Bangkok have told us that they have invested millions and the cost of a few bullets [to kill those who oppose them] was cheap," Chankaew said. On a more positive note, the government has launched a five-year master plan to reduce occupational hazards in the agricultural industry.