

Arab countries meet at UN-backed forum to save jobs in economic crisis



19 October 2009 – High-level delegates from 22 countries are taking part in a United Nations-backed three-day Arab Employment Forum in Beirut to consider ways of sustaining jobs and extending social protection in the face of the global economic crisis.

“Previous indications that the Arab economies would be relatively immune to the contagious effects of the crisis have proven wrong,” said Juan Somavia, Director-General of the International Labour Organization (**ILO**), which is jointly organizing the Forum with the Arab Labour Organization (ALO).

“As in other regions, many ordinary working men and women in the Arab world have lost their jobs, as enterprises face falling demand and investment is postponed. The outlook remains uncertain.”

Government, workers and employers representatives are expected to discuss making employment an explicit target of economic policies, ranging from fiscal and investment stimulus at the macro level to enhancing employability through active labour market policies.

Other policy recommendations include: introducing or expanding unemployment insurance and creating a social protection floor providing access to basic health care, pensions for the elderly and benefits for families with children and for disabled persons; and adopting policies that respect both the rights of nationals to employment and those of migrant workers.

“The crisis adds to the urgency of making employment and social protection a central objective of national and global policies,” Mr. Somavia **said**.

A recent ILO report, which shows that economic growth in the region is likely to fall to around 2 per cent in 2009 from around 4.5 per cent in 2008, forecasts that in the worst case scenario unemployment could reach 11 per cent in both the Middle East and North Africa by the end of the year.

At the same time, due to the large number of migrant workers, it is likely that there will be more than four times as many workers in vulnerable employment as in unemployment in 2009, the report adds.

"Unemployment rates have increased as the economic crisis has developed," ALO Director General Ahmed Mohamed Luqman said. "It is necessary to have an active Arab cooperation to avoid its destructive impact especially on youth, social stability and Arab security."