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Dicing with death

BY K. S. USHA DEVI

THE National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (Niosh) statistics show that the manufacturing industry consistently recorded the highest number of work-related accidents over the years from 2000 up to 2004.

In 2004, the number of accidents reported in this sector was 26,690, of which 4,140 caused impairment and permanent disability, and 195 deaths.

The least number of accidents occurred in the financial and insurance sector, where there were 605 accidents reported in 2004, causing impairment and disability to 123 workers and five fatalities.

Thankfully, the numbers are showing a progressive decline from the years 2000 to 2004, a fact that could be due to the commitment by the authorities, the employers, and the employees themselves in inculcating health and safety measures in the work place.

Certainly, for the prison warder and the electrical maintenance worker featured in Sunday Star's "Dangerous Jobs" this week, survival depends on adhering strictly to the rules on occupational safety

WHEN M. Mahesh (not his real name), 37, was offered a job as a maintenance crew in a power generation and railway company in 2004, he jumped at the chance.

The job required the person to do field work and travel to the electrical power/sub stations of Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB), and that was exactly what he wanted after being involved in a desk job for so many years.

"I took up the offer because I was always interested in fiddling with electrical components.

Besides, the job is not desk-bound," said Mahesh, a former company clerk who handled correspondence and documentation for five years.



RISKY VENTURE: Maintenance crew K. Muralidharan, 42, checking a power transformer. One wrong move and he could fall and be electrocuted by a live power transformer.

As site coordinator, Mahesh is mainly responsible for carrying out maintenance and refurbishment work on power transformers. This involves dismantling and installing or replacing damaged parts of the transformer.

He has five other workers in his team. “The dirty and dangerous part of the job comes from touching the transformer oil, grease, sludge and rust while at a height of between 12.2m and 15.2m on top of the transformer,” he explains.

The job is risky because there is always the fear of falling off an on-line (live) power transformer and being electrocuted by the high voltage when doing rectifying works, he says.

Nevertheless, he enjoys the hands-on nature of the job.

“How many people have the chance to do rectification work on an on-line transformer?” he asks.

On a more serious note, he says he has dived with fate a number of times. Just two months after he joined the company, he relates, he had to stand 15.2m above ground on the tip of the bushing of a transformer while doing some repair work.

Normally, a mobile crane would be used but it couldn’t get to the site, he explains. Surrounded by high electrical energy, the maintenance crew has to be very careful while working on a power transformer. Any wrong move on their part could lead to serious injuries or even death.

“Up to now, there has not been any untoward accidents or deaths, but one of my crew members just missed being hit by a crowbar by inches!” he says, relief etched in his voice.

Mahesh works on many types of transformers, including power transformers, distribution transformers and generator transformers that transfer from 7.5 Mega Volts Amp (MVA) to 240MVA of power.

“Basically, we will know which transformers are used at the various stations depending on the ranking of the sub station,” says Mahesh. Due to the perilous nature of the job, safety procedures are strictly observed. As such, the company makes sure that the crew are all registered with the Construction Industry Development Board Malaysia (CIDB).

“To become a member, you will have to attend a seminar and have a one-to-one oral test with the CIDB officials at their premises,” says Mahesh.

Furthermore, a safety briefing conducted by a Health and Safety Officer or Safety Engineer is held at the subs stations/ power stations before starting any maintenance job. The working crew are also expected to wear the safety attire and have the necessary safety equipment ready at the site.

“Attendance is compulsory for all the crew members who have to wear the safety helmet, shoes and harness,” says Mahesh.

Having been on the job for more than a year now, Mahesh is willing to recommend the job to other similar-minded individuals.

“Sure, it dangerous, difficult and dirty but if the person has a deep interest and is willing to go the extra mile, then why not?” he reasons.