

Myanmar: EU mission assesses human rights and labour rights situation

This follows deeply worrying developments highlighted in various United Nations reports, in particular as regards human rights violations in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States and concerns around labour rights.

This week's high-level mission was part of the broader engagement that the European Commission has launched to monitor Myanmar's respect of fifteen fundamental UN and International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions. In order to continue to benefit from duty-free, quota-free access to the EU market through the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme, Myanmar must uphold and respect the principles enshrined in these conventions.

The findings of this mission will feed into the analysis on whether to remove these trade preferences through a temporary EBA withdrawal procedure. The European Union will now analyse as a matter of priority the information gathered during the mission, as well as further information from the Myanmar government, before considering the next steps. The EU stands ready to provide necessary support to Myanmar to address the concerns of the international community. Nevertheless, withdrawal of trade preferences is a clear possibility if other channels of cooperation have failed to reach results.

Commissioner for Trade Cecilia **Malmström** said: *"Trade, done right, is a powerful force for good. Since several years, we have worked to ensure that trade preferences and access to the EU market are an incentive to promote fundamental human and labour rights. We now expect Myanmar to address the severe shortcomings that have been highlighted during this monitoring mission. If they do not act, Myanmar authorities are putting their country's tariff-free access to the EU market in danger— a scheme which has proved to be vital for the economic and social development of the country, providing thousands of jobs to workers in sectors such as textiles, agriculture and fisheries. We are committed to helping Myanmar improve the situation and ensure that the principles enshrined in the international conventions to which Myanmar has committed are not undermined."*

The EU has reiterated at several occasions its serious concerns about the disproportionate use of force and widespread and systematic grave human rights violations committed by the Myanmar military and security forces, in particular in Rakhine State but also in Kachin and Shan States. These violations were also evidenced most recently in the detailed report of the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar in September of this year.

The EU mission this week met with several ministers, as well as with trade unions, businesses, civil society, and United Nations and International Labour Organisation representatives in the country. It provided the opportunity for an open dialogue with Myanmar on key issues such as: ensuring constructive cooperation with relevant UN bodies; supporting international

efforts to investigate and prosecute individuals suspected of having committed crimes against humanity; ensuring full humanitarian access notably in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States; ensuring implementation of the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, creating conditions for a voluntary, safe and dignified return of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh to their places of origin.

The EU mission also discussed its concerns regarding the continued use of forced labour in parts of the country, in particular by Myanmar's armed forces, including child recruitment, as well as the need for further reforms as regards freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Background

Under the EBA arrangement of the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP), the EU unilaterally grants exporters from Least Developed Countries (LDCs) tariff-free and quota-free access to its market for all products (except arms and ammunition) with the aim to contribute to the economic development of these countries and their integration into the global trading system.

A beneficiary country can have its trade preferences withdrawn temporarily if there is evidence of serious and systematic violations of the core principles laid down in the 15 fundamental international human rights and labour rights conventions of the United Nations and the International Labour Organisation.

The EBA arrangement has brought important benefits to the economy of Myanmar. Preferential exports to the EU have risen sharply in recent years from €535 million in 2015 to €1.3 billion in 2017. Out of all of Myanmar's EBA-eligible exports, 95% were made under EBA preferences. In 2017, 72.2% of Myanmar's exports to the EU could be attributed to textiles, leading to particularly strong job creation and growth in this sector. The EU is the 3rd largest export market of Myanmar, absorbing around 8.8% of Myanmar's total exports in 2017.

The EU has stepped up its engagement with Myanmar (see also the EU [GSP report of January 2018](#)) in response to serious concerns about the continuing deterioration of respect for human rights and the rule of law, as flagged further by the European Parliament ([Resolution of 13 September 2018](#)) and the Council (Foreign Affairs Council's [Conclusions of 26 February 2018](#)).

For More Information

[Blog post by Commissioner Malmström, 5 October](#)

[What is Everything But Arms \(EBA\)?](#)