

CAMBODIAN WORKERS WEIGH THE COST OF EU'S STAND ON HUMAN RIGHTS

BY LEONIE KIJEWski

Phong Sokhit, a rice farmer in Cambodia's Kampong Speu province, has long held out hope that the European Union (EU) would put pressure on his country to respect human rights.

For years, the 59 year old and hundreds of others across the country have accused sugar companies of forcing them off their land – just one of a litany of human rights abuses, including child labour, blamed on the enterprises. About 40 per cent of the sugar produced in Cambodia is exported to the EU.

Last month, the EU announced its intention to suspend its Everything But Arms agreement with the Kingdom, under which it waives tariffs for underdeveloped countries such as Cambodia.

A scandal in Mongolia: heads roll in government after US\$1.3m SME fund embezzlement

"We want the prime minister to help, to compromise, and to improve the human rights situation," Sokhit said in an interview, referring to Cambodia's strongman leader Hun Sen. "It's the EU's duty to [withdraw] it when they know

that we don't respect their requirements, so if they do it, it is the prime minister's mistake, not the EU's."

Although Sokhit welcomes the EU's move, he doesn't want the agreement to be suspended. Instead, he hopes the Cambodian government will meet its conditions and prevent people from losing their jobs.

Under its terms, the agreement can be suspended if certain human rights standards are not met. In an October 5 blog post, European Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmström said that unless there were "clear and evident improvements on the ground", Cambodia's special trade status would be revoked. In the past, the EU has repeatedly called for the release of opposition leader Kem Sokha, who remains under house arrest, and the restoration of his Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), which was dissolved by the Supreme Court last year.

The EU also has called on the government to resolve its land disputes with citizens, most of which involve the sugar industry, and cease the practice of "land grabbing."

"We just hope that the government will address those identified issues to avoid the removal of EBA [status] as this will hurt Cambodia," said Eang Vuthy, director of land rights NGO Equitable Cambodia. "The EU has the full right

under their regulations to choose a sector specific withdrawal or full withdrawal of EBA [status].”

Either option, Vuthy said, would affect Cambodia’s economy. “We hope the government will address the issues as soon as possible to avoid sanctions.”

But Mu Sochua, the exiled deputy leader of the CNRP, said it was unlikely that the Cambodian government would meet the EU’s conditions.

“Hun Sen met [High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs Federica] Mogherini and gave no sign of consideration of compliance to the conditions,” she said. “The EU must move forward towards partial and temporary suspension in the next six months without delay.”

Malaysia’s anti-corruption drive spreads to Borneo as Sabah’s former chief minister Musa Aman hit with 35 charges

Under EU regulations, the EU should “monitor and evaluate” the situation for six months after formally beginning proceedings. Following this evaluation, the European Commission has six months to issue a decision. Should it decide to suspend the agreement, Cambodia’s special trade status would cease after six months. This means that if the commission issues its formal decision to launch the procedure this year, Cambodia would not be affected until mid-2020.

George Edgar, the EU ambassador to Cambodia, said a formal launch of proceedings had not been decided on yet. “There is an internal process of consultation across the commission, followed by consultation of the member states through the relevant committee, but I cannot give a date for completion,” he said.

An EU Commission source said the body could “reconsider the situation” if Cambodia took “credible” measures to remedy the problems.

Sochua said the EU also had other measures at its disposal, such as targeted visa sanctions, which could be implemented immediately.

If EBA status is fully withdrawn, the biggest impact could be felt in the garment sector, which employs about 700,000 workers and supports the livelihoods of thousands more dependent on them.

In an open letter to senior EU officials, Garment Manufacturers Association Cambodia (GMAC) Secretary-General Ken Loo asked for the sector to be spared from tariffs due to improvements in labour conditions. “We remain optimistic that our sector will not be subject to any sweeping sanctions nor any targeted sanctions,” he said.

While EBA status is often associated with the garment industry due to its size, sector-specific suspension is possible. Some NGOs have been calling for an investigation of reported human rights abuses in the sugar sector specifically, and for the potential withdrawal of EBA status for the sector alone.

Karin Ulmer, senior policy officer of Act Alliance EU, welcomed the EU's announcement. "We still ask [for] and recommend the option of product and sector-specific 'investigation' and sector and product-specific suspension targeting the land issues and sugar industry," she said, suggesting that the focus should be on the sugar industry, which has been blamed for the displacement of an estimated 800,000 people in Cambodia.

The EU should, she said, insist on an audit into the land disputes in the sugar sector to ensure fair and comprehensive compensation. The Cambodian government has agreed to conduct a joint audit, but not agreed on any terms of reference.

Japan honours Malaysian PM Mahathir Mohamad, hoping for an ally in checking China's influence

Focusing on the sugar sector would, Ulmer said, avoid "undue or disproportionate impact on populations and tackle instead sectors that are linked to the most serious human rights violations or perpetrators".

“That effect would be above all about those businesses or individuals involved in profiting from [human rights] violations and business in the sugar sector, rather than on the general populations; as such, a tool to target perpetrators and prevent further land grabs.”

Aside from putting pressure on alleged perpetrators, focusing on the sugar sector would recognise that some communities’ rights had been violated and “give some dignity back”.

For community representative Sokhit, the solution lies in the hands of both the Cambodian government and the EU. “For me, the government should compromise, and the EU should too, so people don’t lose their jobs,” he said.