



Rt Hon Dominic Raab
Secretary of State
Foreign & Commonwealth Office
King Charles Street
Whitehall
LONDON
SW1A 2AH

Congress House
Great Russell Street
London
WC1B 3LS
020 7636 4030
tuc.org.uk

8 October 2019

Dear Foreign Secretary,

CAMBODIA: HUMAN RIGHTS AND TRADE DEALS

We are writing to you concerning the publicly reported statement on 17 September of Heather Wheeler, Minister of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for Asia and the Pacific, who informed the Cambodian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation that Cambodia will retain trade privileges in the UK market after a possible Brexit.

We are deeply concerned that such a statement – coming as it does in the middle of EU and US talks over the possible withdrawal of trade privileges because of the deteriorating human rights situation in the country - is not conducive to a positive outcome of the talks.

Indeed, such a statement issued without any reference to conditions which secure a minimum of human rights protection in the country is both rash and contrary to the principles and promise of the UK Government, including a commitment to public and parliamentary scrutiny of any new trade deals.¹ While Secretary of State for International Trade, Liam Fox stated that he was 'not inclined' to drop human rights elements in any deals that were previously incorporated by the EU; "The value we attach to human rights is an important part of who we are as a country".

In addition, In March 2019, the UK Joint Committee on Human Rights published a report on human rights in international agreements. It said that there was "a strong case for requiring minimum standard processes, practices and clauses to protect and promote human rights in all international agreements". It called for greater parliamentary scrutiny of trade agreements, and for negotiating teams to have

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/creating-a-transparent-and-inclusive-future-trade-policy>

access to human rights expertise. In its response, the Government committed to a more extensive scrutiny process for trade agreements.

Cambodia currently enjoys preferential access to the European Union's market through the Everything-but-arms (EBA) scheme. However, the results of a recent EU mission to Cambodia on the human rights situation will be discussed soon with a possible decision to withdraw such privilege unless the Cambodia government shows its willingness to remedy the appalling state of human rights abuses currently taking place.

As you should know, the current human rights situation in Cambodia is deteriorating rapidly. A recent (July 2019) FIDH-OMT mission expressed its utmost concern over the increasingly shrinking civic space for human rights defenders in the country. Repression includes the harassment of activists, NGOs and media outlets and journalists, an increasingly oppressive security presence and restrictive legal amendments. Arrests of activists have increased – including the arrest and detention of journalists and opposition members. State interference has also had a systematic practice, which has had a chilling effect on civil society. New laws have restricted the activities of trade unionists, workers, civil society groups and others. This has led to the arrest of trade unionists for their part in peaceful strikes and the closure of human rights groups as well as independent media.

It is expected that a resolution will be presented at the 42nd session of the Human Rights Council in September to renew the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia for another two years.

Labour Behind the Label and the Trades Union Congress stand with partners in Cambodia and in the UK in asking that UK Government officials refrain from further public posturing on trade deals with Cambodia in the immediate future, given the precarious human rights situation, negotiations going on with EU and the potentially negative effects such blanket statements may have on the security of human rights defenders in Cambodia.

Sincerely,

Dominique Muller
Policy Director
Labour Behind the label



Mariela Kohon
Senior International Officer
Trades Union Congress



CC: Liz Truss, Secretary of State for International Trade
CC: Harriet Harman, Chair, Joint Committee on Human Rights
CC: Emily Thornberry, Shadow Foreign Secretary
CC: Barry Gardiner, Shadow Secretary of State for International Trade

Contacts: Dominique Muller, dominique@labourbehindthelabel.org Stephen Russell srussell@tuc.org.uk