
CAMBODIA'S FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTER MEETS WITH EUROPEAN OFFICIALS

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Democracy, human rights and the Everything But Arms (EBA) trade preferences were discussed in a meeting in Belgium on Monday between Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Minister Prak Sokhonn, his Belgian counterpart Didier Reynders, and EU Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmstrom.

Sokhonn, who is also a deputy prime minister, was in Brussels to participate in the 22nd EU-Asean ministerial meeting and met on its sidelines with Malmstrom and Reynders.

While The Post was unable to reach ministry spokesman Ket Sophann for comment, after the meeting Reynders wrote on Twitter regarding what was discussed.

[I was] in a bilateral interview [conversation] with my Cambodian counterpart in which I stressed the importance of restoring the rule of law and democracy in the country, which would deepen relations with the European Union, he said.

Following the meeting, Malmstrom also tweeted that Cambodias EBA trade preferences were discussed with Sokhonn.

We discussed the EBA agreement and the possibility of a withdrawal of the tariff preferences. [We] reiterated our concerns on democracy, human rights and [the] rule of law. The EU continues to keep the path of dialogue open, she wrote.

EU Commission Trade and Agriculture spokesperson Daniel Rosario declined to comment, only referring to Malmstroms post.

Last October, Malmstrom informed Cambodia that the bloc was preparing to withdraw the countrys EBA preferences for what they claimed were setbacks in democracy, human rights and the rule of law in the Kingdom.

Withdrawing the privileges are intended to pressure the Cambodian government to improve its democracy and human rights records, which some observers claim has been in decline since the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party was dissolved by the Supreme Court in November 2017.

But critics of the proposed measures say it would only hurt the poor, while also being counterproductive in terms of promoting democracy and human rights.

Global politics PhD researcher at the University of Leicester Cindy Cao said the proposed measures

would not likely have a significant impact politically.

In her research paper EU Trade Sanctions on Cambodia: An Ethical Debate, published last October, Cao said such measures would exacerbate poverty among women, minority groups and other marginalised groups, who comprise the majority of low-paid garment sector workers.

Cao is also an associate researcher at the European Institute for Asian Studies.

The EU should opt for partial and calibrated sanctions and avoid adversely impacting the vital industry of garment and footwear which accounts for 75 per cent of Cambodia's exports to the EU and provides employment for some of the most vulnerable segments of society, she wrote.

The paper also found that punitive economic measures were only successful in bringing about desired political change in five to 30 per cent of cases, while they failed 65 to 95 per cent of the time.

Cao said that entirely withdrawing EBA privileges would be counterproductive, and instead advocated short, gradual and partial sanctions with realistic expectations.

EU ambassador to Cambodia George Edgar told The Post on Monday that the European bloc welcomed recent actions taken by Cambodian authorities, including releases in August and September of a number of detained political figures, civil society activists and journalists.

He also welcomed the amendment to the Law on Political Parties that will allow individuals banned from political activity to have their rights reinstated, as well as steps taken to address restrictions on civil society and trade unions.

These are all positive steps and we hope to see them followed up with further action. The EU has emphasised that it will keep the channels of dialogue open, Edgar said.

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