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Brussels, 8.03.2011  
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Ms Heidi Hautala MEP  
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*Dear Heidi*

Commissioner De Gucht has asked me to reply to your letter of 26 January, in which you raise concerns about compulsory acquisition of land for commercial sugar production in Cambodia and the attendant human rights abuses, notably forced evictions of the farming communities already on the land.

Without prejudice to DG TRADE's further consideration of the trade-related issues which you raise in your letter, I want to tell you that I view this problem from the wider angle of protecting the rights of the local communities already occupying land. This, in turn, relates to a proper system for administration of land titles and a fair application of the legislation now in force governing land concessions. At present, concessions made for commercial purposes, so-called economic land concessions, considerably outnumber social concessions, i.e. land redistribution for social purposes.

This issue has been on the table with Cambodia for some time. We have raised it repeatedly in recent years with the authorities, particularly in our annual Joint Committee meetings. We have underlined the responsibility of the Cambodian Government to ensure equitable social-economic development, to manage its natural resources in a transparent way and to ensure the full implementation and enforcement of Land Management legislation.

We have also included in our cooperation programmes a series of actions, including direct support to local groups – in areas such as land rights and legal defense – and the management and delivery of land titles, both for local communities and farmers.

Moreover, the EU has cooperated closely with Cambodian civil society, for example in the framework of the Civil Society Seminar on Human Rights Defenders organized by the EU in August 2010 in Phnom Penh, where land rights activists actively participated in discussions. In addition, the EU funds Cambodian NGOs under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights in order to raise the awareness of communities affected by land conflicts and provide training on their rights and how to defend them.

The Cambodian Government has shown some responsiveness to our concerns, for instance holding an official enquiry at local level into one of the recent incidents, but given the pervasiveness of the problem, they should be more active.

After consultation with the Member States, I have now asked the EU HoMs in Phnom Penh to engage more intensively with the authorities on this issue in the coming weeks and, in the course of these efforts, to liaise closely with the civil society organizations concerned. That work is now under way.

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*Catherine Ashton*

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