



20 June 2011

Dear Commissioner de Gucht,

On May 13 - 21 I travelled to Cambodia on a private fact finding mission. Since a long time, I have a very good relation to our sister party, the Sam Rainsy Party and I therefore decided to visit them and learn about the situation in the country before the upcoming elections in 2013.

During my stay I met not only with Mu Sochua (Sam Rainsy Party) and other liberals and opposition politicians, but also with government representatives, the EU Chargé d'Affaires, the Swedish Ambassador, NGOs and, most important, several hundred affected villagers who shared their very sad stories with me.

I travelled to the provinces of Kompong Speu and Koh Kong and I also visited areas within the city of Phnom Penh where people have been forcefully evicted from their homes. I would briefly like to share with you some of my experiences related to the Everything But Arms (EBA) programme and its consequences for the villagers in the provinces of Kompong Speu and Koh Kong, where the EBA is affecting people and certainly not in the way the initiative had intended.

I am a staunch supporter of free trade and consider the EBA to be a programme with very good and ambitious intentions. I am sure that it has helped to increase the export of goods, mainly textiles and garment industry products, to the EU and that it has thus been beneficial to trade and a good method of eradicating poverty. It has indeed been fruitful where it has been correctly implemented. But even if this initiative has mainly had positive results, we must not be blind to the fact that it has also in some aspects had negative effects that were not easy to foresee.

On January 26 this year, my colleague MEP Heidi Hautala wrote you a letter concerning the alarming situation in Cambodia on land grabbing and the role that the EBA initiative may have on the situation. You considered the issue to be a matter for High Representative Ashton who subsequently answered Ms Hautala, but I am afraid that her reply did not give satisfactory answers to the important questions raised in the letter.

Therefore, I now take the opportunity to address you on this issue, convinced that you will have the possibility to answer yourself since this is without a doubt an issue related to trade and consequently should be answered by you as the Commissioner on Trade.

The Economic Land Concessions (ELCs), a preferential treatment of sugar industry within the framework of the EBA initiative, grants sugar producers in Cambodia a guaranteed tariff and quota free access to the EU market, and is reported to have contributed to repeated severe human rights abuses throughout the country.

Cambodian sugar industry has vastly expanded with the help of the ELCs in recent years.

The alleged Human Rights abuses include forced evictions, police violence, and illegal confiscation of land and property, forest clearance and increased militarization. The evidence of nation-wide human rights abuses has been well documented by the United Nations Office and a number of other international and national organisations. These violations would seem to be directly linked to the land concessions related to sugar production benefiting of the EBA initiative. I will be happy to provide you with the documentation and will also try to furnish information in relation to any questions you might want to raise.

The people I met during my visit, several hundred in every village I went to, repeated the same extremely sad and hopeless stories over and over again. They have been farming their land for generations, but in some cases, the issuing of land titles from the government is very slow and not always given to the people who have the right to obtain them. Since the days of the Khmer rouge, it has been difficult to claim ownership and to prove ownership to land and property.

This facilitates the land grabbing for the land concession holders and leaves the farmers without rights. Some have been promised money in compensation, others have not, but no one I spoke to had been compensated. Some people got another piece of land as compensation which either turned out to be impossible to use as farming land due to cliffs and rocks or was located in remote areas. Some villagers still have their house; others got evicted from their homes and are now left to live with relatives in nearby villages not yet affected by the land grabbing. In one village we visited, also the well was destroyed when the sugar companies demolished the village and prepared the land for the sugar plantation. The villagers now have to walk five kilometres to find water.

Many of the affected villagers have with help from NGOs (e.g. Community Legal Education Centre (CLEC)) filed complaints but has heard nothing back. These people are more or less invisible to the government and have lost all their rights. The problem is of course vaster than the EBA, but there are still proofs of that EBA have triggered the companies to expand in Cambodia. Some companies have even expressed openly that they would not have been there if it wasn't for the EBA initiative.

The EBA initiative of course covers more products than sugar and it is for this reason that I would like to request the European Commission to look into the possibility of a temporary suspension of the EBA provisions with regard to sugar and other agricultural products from Cambodia. This would send a clear message that the EU does not allow an initiative to go on when human rights are severely violated and abuses take place.

In connection to this, I would also like to urge the European Commission to conduct a thorough investigation into the human rights abuses under the human rights safeguard provisions of the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) regulation. Such an investigation should be independent from the investigation of the Cambodian government.

Commissioner de Gucht, I strongly underline the urgency and the seriousness of this situation and the abuses that are taking place in the name of trade in Cambodia. I sincerely hope that you will urgently look into the situation and consider a temporary suspension of the EBA initiative on sugar and other agricultural products in Cambodia until all irregularities have been properly addressed. As this is an issue clearly concerning trade with Cambodia I hope that you will not pass on my letter but treat it as a trade issue and address it as such.

I would be happy to meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss the issue further.

With my best regards,

Cecilia Wikström
Member of the European Parliament (ALDE)