

Summary of European Parliament session on Bangladesh

7 November 2019

Commission:

The Commission noted that Bangladesh is the largest beneficiary of the “Everything But Arms” (EBA) preferential treatment – resulting in continual gross domestic product (GDP) growth and lowering of poverty. Enhanced engagement had been ongoing since 2017 and had resulted in some improvements to health and safety but less so with labour and human rights. In June 2018, Bangladesh committed to implement improvements with respect to the 27 International Labour Organization/ United Nations (ILO/UN) conventions within the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) legislation – normally a condition of benefitting from the EBA preferences. Since then, there had been some progress (e.g. labour laws) but not enough. During the recent mission they met with numerous stakeholders (business, government, NGOs, unions), the ILO and UN and visited factories. In conclusion, the Commission made clear that Bangladesh needs to take measures on a number of issues (e.g. freedom of association (FOA), child labour, labour inspection) and to provide a roadmap with definitive changes and a timeline.

European External Action Service:

The European External Action Service (EEAS) was particularly critical on issues such as child labour, children and women’s rights, child marriage, the death penalty, torture, extradition killings, elections, restrictions on freedom of expression and the media, freedom of association, and labour and human rights in general.

Ambassador:

The Bangladeshi ambassador gave an overview of the success that EBA had brought; rise in exports, increase to GDP, lowering of poverty. He noted that the minimum wage had been increased 162% since 2010, that 693 trade unions had been registered since 2013, and that 3800 factories had been inspected for fire safety. He also noted that there had been substantive amendments to the Labour Act and expressed surprise that a workers’ delegation had lodged a complaint (containing errors and out-dated information) with the ILO. He called for a fair price for ready-made garment (RMG) and that the EU should focus on a single sustainability platform. He concluded by saying it was crucial Bangladesh be given GSP+ preferences when it graduates from EBA in 2024.

International Trade Union Confederation:

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) noted that Bangladesh was one of the ten worse countries for FOA and that there had been a deterioration in workers’ rights. The minimum wage hike was not sufficient and wage protests are brutally crushed (even resulting in deaths). There were still injuries in the workplace, labour laws are out of step and unions are not permitted in Export Processing Zones (EPZs). They have requested that the Commission initiate a GSP investigation.

amfori:

Stuart Newman, Senior Legal Advisor - Trade & Customs, noted that we are not “free trade at any cost” but strive for sustainability in the supply chains, with open and sustainable trade being a driver to meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). amfori mentioned its commitment to Women’s Empowerment and that the organisation has a specific programme in the country. amfori’s

involvement with the Bangladesh Accord was noted (50% of signatories are amfori members and a Board member is on the Steering Committee) and that workplace related deaths had dropped by 95% since its inception. It was stressed that Bangladesh needed to enact further improvements to labour rights and human rights. amfori reminded Bangladesh that the Commission had opened an investigation to decide whether Cambodia should lose its EBA preferences owing to a lack of commitment to ILO/UN Conventions. amfori stated that it placed great value on those conventions. If a similar investigation was opened against Bangladesh, which concluded preferences should be removed owing to a lack of commitment to those conventions, amfori would support that conclusion.

MEPs:

Interventions by MEPs included: that Bangladesh was 149/180 in the Corruption Index; that political opposition was under pressure; problems with FOA; lack of adequate labour law in EPZs and problems with labour rights in general. It was noted that the EP's request to the Commission to launch an EBA investigation last year was rejected because there was "enhanced dialogue". The credibility of the current dialogue and roadmap was also questioned. Bangladesh was asked for an updated on its progress towards improvements to labour/human rights. amfori was thanked for being so clear on how seriously BD should take concerns and make improvements, and for supporting removal of preferences if an investigation showed Bangladesh was not meeting its commitments. The INTA Chair concluded by saying he was losing his patience as nothing really had been done in six years, especially concerning EPZs.

Responses:

The Commission responded that the content and timetable of the roadmap was being discussed and emphasised that Bangladesh had been warned strongly improvements were needed. It confirmed that when Bangladesh graduates in 2024 (with three-year transition) it will fall to standard GSP and that if assessed today it would not meet GSP+ requirements. It also noted a report on EBA countries with whom it has enhanced dialogue would be published in January 2020.

The Ambassador repeated that Bangladesh took its commitments to labour and human rights seriously. The ITUC did not make a further intervention. amfori responded to an MEPs question on human rights due diligence (HRDD); that it was an important issue highlighted in our Agenda 2024 and that the organisation supported a level playing field at the EU level.