

EC/Uzbekistan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement: bilateral trade in textiles. Protocol

2010/0323(NLE) - 15/12/2011 - Interim resolution adopted by Parliament

The European Parliament adopted by 603 votes to 8, with 11 abstentions, an interim report on the draft Council decision on the conclusion of a Protocol to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement establishing a partnership between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and Uzbekistan, of the other part, amending the Agreement in order to extend the provisions of the Agreement to bilateral trade in textiles, taking account of the expiry of the bilateral textiles Agreement.

Parliament states that it will only consider the consent if the ILO observers have been granted access by the Uzbek authorities to undertake close and unhindered monitoring and have confirmed that concrete reforms have been implemented and yielded substantial results in such a way that the practice of forced labour and child labour is effectively in the process of being eradicated.

In its interim resolution, Parliament recalls that the Union is one of the main importers of cotton from Uzbekistan, estimates of which range from importing 6% to 23% of Uzbek cotton exports over the past ten years. It recalls that on the basis of the principles and objectives of the Union's external action, the Union has the moral responsibility to use its leverage, as one of the main trading partners and a major importer of cotton from Uzbekistan, to stop the use of forced child labour in this country. Therefore, the Protocol cannot be treated as a purely technical agreement, as long as human rights concerns, such as forced child labour, are raised specifically with regard to cotton harvest.

Parliament also underlines:

- the well-documented allegations and broad consensus among the United Nations bodies, the UNICEF, the representative organizations of employers and workers and NGOs stating that, despite the legal commitments made by the Government of Uzbekistan to eradicate forced child labour, in practice, year after year an estimated number of 0.5 to 1.5 million school-aged children are still forced to take part in the hazardous work in the cotton harvest for up to three months each year;
- independent international observers have gathered evidence of forced labour and in particular forced child labour as a systematic and organised practice involving pressure on teachers and families with the participation of the police and security forces;
- so far the Government of Uzbekistan has refused access to independent monitoring missions the purpose of which was to bring out the facts and provide information on the duration of the Autumn harvest period, the working health conditions of students, their ages and where relevant the risk of punishments for disobedience.

Against this background, Parliament requests the Council and the Commission to:

- strongly condemn the use of forced child labour in Uzbekistan;
- strongly support the ILOs call on the Government of Uzbekistan to accept a high-level tripartite observer mission that would have full freedom of movement and timely access to all locations and relevant parties, including in the cotton fields, in order to assess the implementation of the ILO Convention;
- urge the Uzbek President Islam Karimov to allow an ILO monitoring mission into the country to address the issue of forced child labour practices;
- urge the Government of Uzbekistan to allow an ILO monitoring mission and to ensure that the practice of forced labour and forced child labour is effectively in the process of being eradicated at national, viloyat and local level;
- remind the Uzbek authorities that despite the fact that human rights principles are included in the text of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan and that Uzbekistan has signed and ratified most UN conventions relating to human rights, civil and political rights and the rights of the child, this formal set of legal acts still needs to be implemented effectively;
- contribute through policy dialogue and assistance programmes to market-oriented reforms of Uzbekistan's agricultural sector;
- ensure that pursuing the end to the practice of forced child labour in cotton production will be a priority of the Union human rights strategy in the Union Delegation in Tashkent. Members insist that this should be reflected in policy, monitoring, reporting, staffing and financial assistance;
- study and if appropriate submit to the European Parliament a legislative proposal on an effective traceability mechanism for the goods being produced through forced child labour;
- support the Parliaments call to cotton traders and retailers to desist from buying cotton produced by forced child labour from Uzbekistan and to notify consumers and all of their suppliers of this commitment.

Parliament stresses that if ILO monitoring bodies conclude that serious and systematic breach of Uzbekistan's obligations exists, the Commission should consider initiating an investigation into the temporary withdrawal of the GSP if all other requirements are met.

Parliament outlines the importance of the relations between the Union and Uzbekistan on the basis of the PCA and its democratic and human rights principles. It reiterates the Union's commitment to further and deepen bilateral relations, which include trade, as well as all areas related to democratic principles, respect for human and fundamental rights and the rule of law. In this context, Parliament requests to be regularly informed with substantial information on the situation in Uzbekistan, especially with regard to the eradication of forced child labour.

The resolution concludes that Parliament will only consider the consent if the ILO observers, have been granted access by the Uzbek authorities to undertake close and unhindered monitoring and have confirmed that concrete reforms have been implemented and yielded substantial results in such a way that the practice of forced labour and child labour is effectively in the process of being eradicated at national, viloyat and local level.