



European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)
Confédération européenne des syndicats (CES)

Brussels, 21 February 2012
BS/TJ/sw

Baroness Catherine Ashton
High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
European External Action Service
1046 Brussels

Letter sent by e-mail: catherine.ashton@ec.europa.eu

Burma: EU Common Decision

Dear Ms Ashton,

In recent months, numerous delegations from the European Commission have visited Burma to assess the evolving political situation in the country. No doubt, some change is afoot. The government initiated a political dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) in 2011, which is ongoing. The National League for Democracy (NLD) succeeded in registering as a political party and ASSK and other NLD activists will stand for parliament in the April 2012 by-elections, though we would point out that the NLD has now denounced attempts to stifle its campaign. The government has recently released under certain conditions several political prisoners, including trade union activists and leaders of the “88-Generation”, though legislation enabling peremptory arrests remains. Censorship of media and restrictions on internet access has been lifted. Cease-fire agreements have been negotiated with some ethnic groups.

In response to these developments, the EU recently relaxed visa sanctions on 87 government officials, which is an appropriate and measured response. The EU should recognise progress when it happens and reward that progress accordingly to encourage further reforms. However, from several public statements, it appears that the EU is considering lifting restrictive measures in April. It also seems that the EU has relinquished the possibility of sending observers for the April elections, while relying on their outcome to take such decisive steps.

The European Trade Union Confederation does not believe that the time is yet ripe for a major revision of sanctions policy.

Much remains to be done: many of the human rights violations that instructed the EU Common Position are still unfortunately widespread and the current constitution is deeply flawed, while unacceptable legislative instruments remain. Forced labour, including the conscription and use of child soldiers, continues and few have been punished for committing these crimes. A significant number of political prisoners remain in jail, and the military has continued brutal attacks on ethnic communities - and the underlying causes of the long-running armed conflicts have not been addressed.

Enclosed is a copy of the ITUC's Burma Sanctions Benchmarks, that the ETUC supports fully. This document articulates, in the view of trade unions, what remains to be done and argues that any future relaxation in sanctions must be incremental, matching evidence of real and substantial progress with an appropriate relaxation of sanctions. We urge you to give this document due consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions regarding the document or our view on the current situation in Burma.

In any event I would like to discuss this matter with you, along with other issues about which I shall be writing separately. My office will be in touch with yours in due course.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'B. Ségol', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Bernadette Ségol
General Secretary