

Brussels, 20 July 2009  
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Dr Caroline Lucas MEP  
European Parliament  
Brussels

*Dear Catherine,*

Thank you for your letter of 29 May 2009 in which you raise concerns regarding child labour practices in Uzbekistan.

I share your deep concern about the reports on forced child labour in Uzbekistan. The Commission has already raised this issue with Uzbek authorities on several occasions, and will continue to do so.

Most recently, the Commission expressed its concerns about child labour during the EU-Uzbekistan Human Rights Dialogue on 9 June 2009. In particular, the Commission expressed its concerns regarding the secrecy concerning conditions in the cotton harvest and urged Uzbekistan to allow the independent monitoring of activities where child labour is alleged to take place. The Commission also encouraged Uzbekistan to work closely with UNICEF and the ILO on this issue.

However, Uzbekistan denies the existence of forced child labour during the cotton harvest and referred to its ratification in 2008 of ILO Conventions 138 on minimum age of employment and 182 on elimination of the worst forms of child labour. Uzbekistan also argued that its national legislation on children ensures a higher level of protection for children than required by ILO conventions.

Uzbekistan's adherence to the relevant ILO Conventions and the adoption of domestic legislation "On guarantees of child rights", provides us with a basis for dialogue and incitation to an effective implementation of legislation by the Uzbek authorities.

As a transitional economy which shares many of the same characteristics as a developing country, Uzbekistan indeed benefits from preferential access to the EU market under the EU's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), although as it happens the vast majority of its exports to the EU are not under the GSP-regime, but consists of products which the EU imports duty-free on a non-preferential basis (i.e. these products are duty free under a general import regime, whatever their origin). But the Commission shall nonetheless continue to monitor the situation in case action under the relevant provisions of the GSP Regulation would be called for. In this respect, we shall continue to pay close attention to the reports produced by those international bodies, notably within the UN and ILO, that are competent for the ongoing monitoring of countries' compliance with international standards in the field of child labour.

I also take this opportunity to inform you that the Commission has proposed to hold a civil society seminar in autumn 2009 with "Children's Rights" as one of the possible topics.

*Yours sincerely*

*Cathy*

Catherine Ashton