KINGDOM OF CAMBODIA
NATION RELIGION KING

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION
Department of Information

Statement of the Royal Government of Cambodia in response to the European Commission's decision to launch the formal procedure for the temporary withdrawal of the Everything But Arms (EBA) preferences for Cambodia

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The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) expresses its deep regret over the European Commission's (EC) decision on 11 February 2019 to launch the formal procedure for the temporary withdrawal of the Everything But Arms (EBA) preferences for Cambodia.

The RGC considers this decision as an extreme injustice when the EC disregards the concrete measures and substantial progresses made by the RGC in its adherence and commitment to the implementation of the 15 UN and ILO core Conventions, which are the pre-conditions to the continuation of the EBA unilateral trade preferences, particularly in the areas that were underlined in the RGC's Statement on 3 December 2018 regarding the strengthening of political and civil society spaces, promoting labour rights and addressing land issues and sugarcane economic land concessions (ELC).

The RGC is of the view that the EC has not acted on the principles of "Good faith" and "Fairness". While many countries receiving the EU trade preferences have not fully complied with these international conventions and to which the EC has closed a blind eye, the EC hiding behind its political agenda has unfairly imposed and expected the "perfect implementation" of these Conventions from Cambodia. The EC fails, in absolute term, to recognize the steady improvement and progress that the RGC has made, as communicated through its response letter accompanied by a comprehensive matrix progress report dated 4 January 2019. To any neutral and fair observer, all the RGC's actions and measures can be recognized as substantial in nature, taking into account the complexity of many of these issues. The progress the RGC has done in the last eight months since the first goodwill trip to Brussels is a good gauge of its sincerity and commitment.

More specifically, on the principle of multi-party, the EC is narrow-mindedly focused on the existence of the dissolved CNRP and the fate of its leadership. The EC is challenging the legitimacy of last July election on the sole ground that the CNRP was missing from the elections. The EC fails to recognize the 19 parties contesting the election, which had received nearly a million and half votes, representing 23% of valid votes. By not acknowledging this factual truth the EC is blatantly showing its bias inasmuch as the utmost contempt to those voters and their parties for their participation, their right, and their political choice.

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The EC has not shown due respect to Cambodia's sovereignty when their EBA demands are tantamount to acts of interference with the political development in the country. It has chosen to deny the voices of the overwhelming majority of the Cambodian voters who have shown their votes of support for the RGC. Instead the EC has opted to side with a handful of politicians who have built their popularity on racial hatred, xenophobia, and inflammatory speeches inciting people to start a civil war. The EC has not given due credit to the efforts of the RGC to enable the 118 former CNRP cadres to be fully reintegrated into their political life. Moreover, the EC has conveniently remained silent on the fact that these cadres were taken hostage by their own leader who threatened to consider them as traitors should they choose to request the rehabilitation of their rights.

The EC has not taken into account the RGC's constructive partnership with civil society organizations. Instead, the EC acts in bad faith by relying on the systematic and bias criticism coming from a dozen of local and foreign NGOs but fails to recognize the full freedom enjoyed by the 2,286 associations, 3,221 local NGOs and 397 foreign NGOs. Principles dictates that the EU policies should be applied across the board and not conditioned on unilateral or bilateral exchanges of consideration, whether the EU granted unilaterally the trades preference to Cambodia or whether the EU concluded free trade agreements with other countries.

By launching the formal procedure of EBA withdrawal for Cambodia, the EC takes the risk of negating twenty years' worth of development efforts which the RGC had persevered to pull millions of people out of poverty and as a result such decision would nullify the enormous positive impact of the European policy from which Cambodia has benefited so far. Certainly, Cambodia is mindful that this decision is made by the two Commissioners, without taking into account neither the fate of nearly 1 million Cambodian female workers, nor the interest of the European businesses in Cambodia, nor the decades long good bilateral relations Cambodia has with key major EU member states. Nevertheless, the Cambodian Government commits to continue working in good faith with these countries to advance cooperation and partnership based on mutual respect.

All these arguments notwithstanding, the Government is committed to continue enhancing the democratic space, human rights, labor rights as mentioned in its 3rd December 2018 Statement. However, we are as much determined to protect our peace, stability, independence and sovereignty at all cost. We will continue to make every effort to address all immediate socio-economic issues facing our people's livelihood, especially those who are relying on sectors that could be affected by the decision. Last but not least, we regret that the EC has chosen to believe a handful of dishonest politicians who continuously try to find every means to destroy their own country and their people rather than respecting the voices of those who are legitimately elected.

Phnom Penh, 12 February 2019.