

EU Member States back Commission recommendation to withdraw trade privileges from Belarus over labour standards - Brussels, 20 December 2006

European Member States have adopted a European Commission recommendation that the European Union withdraw trade preferences from Belarus over serious and systematic violations of core labour rights. The Commission welcomes the decision of EU Member States to back its recommendation.

Belarus now has six further months to address labour rights issues or its preferential market access under the EU's Generalised System of Preferences will be removed. About 12.3% of Belarus' imports to the European Union entered the EU market with preferential rates in 2005.

EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson said: "The incentives for basic labour standards in EU trade policy have to be real. Where countries systematically flout core labour standards, we need to be prepared to act. This decision is a test case of our collective commitment to the promotion of workers rights as an integral part of our trade policy."

Background

In 2003 the Commission decided to initiate an investigation into the situation in Belarus concerning freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. The investigation found that there were serious and systematic violations of such core labour rights in that country. In 2004 an ILO Commission of Inquiry found that Belarus was in breach of a number of ILO conventions to which it is a signatory, chiefly related to freedom of association and collective bargaining for workers. At the current time, Belarus has not made the requisite commitments to remedying this problem.

The Regulation withdrawing trade preferences will enter into force six months after its adoption, unless the situation in Belarus changes significantly before then.