

May 4, 2015

Answers by Minister Ploumen of Foreign Trade and Development Co-operation to

Parliamentary Questions by the members Voordewind (ChristianUnion), Van der Staaij (Political Reformed Party) and Van Laar (Labour Party) on modern slavery and child labour in the garment industry in India.

[submitted April 20, 2015 – 2015Z07205]

Question 1

Do you know the recent articles and reports about victims of modern slavery in the South Indian textile industry, including the article *Opgesloten in de fabriek* ("Trapped in the factory"; *OneWorld*, March 2015) and articles in the Indian press about a Dalit girl found hanged under suspicious circumstances in a spinning mill and girls who have fled from spinning mills and girls that were liberated? Do you know the recent report about the great physical and psychological problems among teenage girls who work under the 'Sumangali Scheme'? ⁽¹⁾

Answer

Yes.

Question 2

Do you think that in addition to the efforts made by the Netherlands with regard to Bangladesh and Pakistan to improve working conditions in the textile sector, also the modern slavery in South India, of which about 200,000 women and girls are victims, deserves urgent action by the Dutch companies involved and by you and your European colleagues?

Answer

The problems associated with the Sumangali system and other forms of bonded labour (conditions that are characterized as modern slavery) in the (South) Indian textile industry do have the attention of Dutch business and the government.

Trade organisation VGT has on behalf of the trade organisations MODINT and Inretail participated in several multi-stakeholder meetings with NGOs, international retailers, trade unions and other retail representatives that want to address the problems of forced and bonded labour in South India and Tamil Nadu through a joint initiative, based on United Nation's Guiding Principles and inspired by the Bangladesh Accord. This initiative is still at an early stage. Once the initiative takes solid form, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will consider how this initiative can be supported.

As part of the development of this initiative (and partly in response to recent publications, articles and incidents), the Dutch embassy in New Delhi is in regular contact with representatives of local and international NGOs and companies as well as the ILO and other international organisations to examine how the problem can be brought to attention and addressed most effectively. Because of the political sensitivity, especially in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, several previous attempts to have a dialogue under the supervision of – among others – the ILO between the various stakeholders (including the Indian authorities) have failed.

Question 3

What is the outcome of consultations with the trade associations VGT, Modint and Inretail ⁽²⁾ about increasing the involvement with among others the working-group 'bonded labour' under the Plan of Action? Which companies have joined meanwhile, and which activities are being undertaken? What steps are you taking yourself to increase an active approach of the companies involved?

Answer

At present O'Neill and trade association VGT (also on behalf of Modint and InRetail) actively participate in the working-group 'bonded labour' which discusses and considers on how to join the aforementioned initiative.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs participated in a letter of VGT which invited Dutch companies mentioned in the ICN/FNV Mondiaal report *Small Steps, Big Challenges* to participate in the working-group. Since these companies are often smaller players, the initiative mentioned in answer 2 will be asked to explicitly focus on possibilities for these companies to participate.

Question 4

Are you willing to raise the problem of modern slavery and child labour in the South Indian textile industry and its possible solutions during the Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and value chains that will be organised by the Netherlands prior to the Dutch EU Presidency? ⁽³⁾

Question 5

Are you also willing to raise this issue incisively in the European Union before and after the CSR Conference in view of a possible joint approach with the Indian Government?

Answer to 4 and 5

The conference that will be held in Amsterdam on December 7, 2015, focuses on what the EU can do - particularly in its trade and development policy - to make global value chains sustainable. The worst human rights and environmental violations are mainly found in production countries. Modern slavery and child labour in the textile industry in India are examples of this. The idea is to present good practices during the conference which address such human rights and environmental violations in specific global value chains (such as CSR Sectoral Agreements) and private sector development (PSD) initiatives). When good examples of ICSR and PSD will be scaled up to EU level and will be encouraged in (among others) the EU aid and trade policy, it will result in a more balanced playing field for trendsetting companies and for more influence on the sustainability of global value chains.

With this approach possible solutions for abuses in the chain, such as modern slavery and child labour in India, will automatically be part of the conference.

Question 6

Are you planning to look for collaboration with your French and German colleagues, because Germany supports an important sectoral initiative of textile companies and civil society organizations? ⁽⁴⁾

Answer

Yes. Also examples of good practices from other countries could be scaled up to the EU level are part of the conference.

Question 7

Are you willing to support the European “flagship initiative for the responsible management of the supply chain in the garment sector” and to ensure that this initiative will lead to concrete action, including as expressed in a letter to the European Commission from inter alia the Clean Clothes Campaign and the *European Coalition for Corporate Justice*?⁽⁵⁾

Are you willing to put this issue on the agenda during the economic mission to India scheduled in June 2015? If so, will you please inform the parliament about the results?

Answer

Yes, I support the initiative of the European Commission and indeed hope that this will lead to concrete action at European level. It is currently discussed together with some like-minded EU member states which joint suggestions we can present to the European Commission.

Equal rights for women and the prevention of child labour worldwide have my considerable attention. Where possible I will discuss these issues during the economic mission to India. This also fits with the CSR agenda of the Indian government itself, which is in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and includes promoting equal status of women and children rights, including through education and sanitation. In India, the Netherlands supports a project of the organisation Global March (the organisation of Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi) which among others includes the international group 'Parliamentarians Without Borders' comprising of 20 parliamentarians who are committed to the fight against child labour, including five Indian and one Dutch MP (Van Laar). During my visit to India in June 2015, I hope to discuss the progress on the issues you mentioned with the Indian parliamentarians.

Question 8

How you co-operate with the ILO and OECD in addressing bonded labour and child labour in the Indian textile industry and what are the results?

Answer

The OECD guidelines for multinational companies determine the standard Dutch companies must meet when they do business abroad, including the Indian textile sector. These guidelines also mean that companies must adhere to the fundamental labour rights as defined in among others ILO Convention no. 29 on the elimination of forced labour and ILO Conventions Nos. 138 and 182 concerning the prohibition of child labour, of which the last two have not yet being ratified by India.

Both in the ILO and as well in other for a the Netherlands advocates that countries must adhere to fundamental labour standards. The Netherlands calls on these countries to ratify the fundamental labour conventions and to bring national legislation in line with the relevant treaties.

The General System of Preferences (GSP+) is also an important incentive to address countries like India on their obligations under ILO Convention no. 29, and to engage them in ILO Conventions Nos. 138 and 182. The GPS+ is a special arrangement to promote sustainable development and good governance. It encourages countries to implement 27 international conventions in exchange for extra EU trade preferences - especially for textiles and clothing, vegetable products and prepared food. ILO Conventions 29, 138 and 182 are part of the GPS+.

However, the main partner of the Netherlands for actually strengthening labour standards is the ILO itself. The ILO runs in India a "Decent Work Country Programme". An important part of this program is cooperation with the government to improve the application of the ratified fundamental ILO Conventions, including Convention no. 29.

Finally, the Netherlands is an important donor to the Regular Budget Supplementary Account (RBSA) of the ILO, an unearmarked flexible fund that allows ILO to respond quickly and using its own discretion to emerging situations. With this fund the ILO has contributed in 2014 also in India to the reduction of forced labour and slavery.

Notes:

- (1) <http://www.oneworld.nl/magazineditie/oneworld-02-2015>,
<http://www.dalits.nl/SlachtoffersSpinnerijen.html>, <http://www.indianet.nl/sumangali.html> and
<http://www.indianet.nl/150331n.html>
- (2) Annex of Proceedings, Parliamentary Year 2013-2014, no. 2324
- (3) Letter from the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Co-operation, document 32 605, no. 157
- (4) Website Textilbündnis: <http://www.textilbuendnis.com/index.php/en/>
- (5) <http://www.cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/joint-letter-to-the-eu/view>

Translation by ICN; original document in Dutch: <http://www.indianet.nl/pdf/kv150504.pdf>