

# GSP+ Opportunity to Strengthen Human Rights Protection in Pakistan

Karachi, 30 May 2022

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Let me congratulate the Human Rights Department of the Government of Sindh to organise today's conference. I feel honoured to be here.

Human rights are and will remain a central part of the European Union's policy, whether inside the Union or in our foreign policy. The political wish to promote and protect Human rights as part of our fundamental values is even growing in light of the threat they are suddenly exposed to by the Russian Federation in our immediate neighbourhood.

Human rights have been part of our foreign policy around the globe for long time. Mainly through political dialogue, debate with civil society organisations and exchange of views with economic actors, we work together with partner countries on the respect and implementation of Human rights. This is the precondition for freedom, peace and prosperity.

I am glad to say that we have been working with Pakistan for many years already on Human rights, and this not only at federal level. Many things have been achieved.

For me, one of the most important achievement is the *de facto* moratorium as regards the death penalty. The implementation of many common objectives still need to be discussed. And the conference today is an ideal forum to do so.

In recent months, I have heard people saying Human Rights in Pakistan should be seen in the context of traditions, history and culture, above all in rural areas. Let me be very clear: Human Rights are indivisible, not interpretable, adaptable or adjustable. The right of a boy or a girl not to be subject to child labour is the same, whether in a rural or urban area; the right of a girl of access to school and higher education must be the same everywhere.

Since 2014, Pakistan benefits from the preferential trade regime under GSP+. Actually I should better say, Pakistan and the EU benefit from the GSP+ regime. GSP+ is a very efficient tool to facilitate and increase trade with Pakistan. It provides incentives for Pakistani producers, factory owners, employers and traders to work together with their European partners.

It allows the EU to export high quality standards of goods, which is in the ultimate benefit of consumers also in Pakistan and, it increases the competitiveness of Pakistani products in third countries, beyond the EU.

Owners of textile factories have recently confirmed this to me.

By linking EU unilateral trade concessions and preferences to achievements by Pakistan in the areas of Human rights, labour law, environment – in the future also in the combat of climate change - and to good governance, we have put forward many challenges to Pakistan. Fully aware that the implementation of not every of the 27 international conventions and agreements in the current GSP+ regime can be achieved over night, we have committed ourselves to working together with all levels of state, CSOs, employers and trade unions. And we are glad that Pakistan is ready to take over and implement these obligations. This is not least a very positive signal that Pakistan remains committed to international law and the international rules based order, which is so much under risk these days.

To show only a small part of our past cooperation on Human rights, as one of the results of our *Huqooq-e-Pakistan* project, training modules on human rights and relevant international conventions, agreements and standards have been included in the permanent curriculum of the Sindh Judicial Academy. This contributes to good governance.

The GSP+ regime currently in place will come to its end next year. We will analyse to which degree our

requirements have been fulfilled so far by means of a monitoring mission. I have notified the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Friday that the mission of Brussels experts will arrive in Pakistan on 20 June and complete its work by 1 July. The findings of this mission, even if mostly of technical nature, and the overall result are not only relevant for the current GSP+ regime. They are at least equally important for the discussions of Pakistan with the EU for the next GSP+ regime as from 2024.

The next regime and its conditions are currently discussed and prepared in our Headquarters. As things stand today, obtaining GSP+ status again will not be easier for Pakistan than in 2014.

The European Union is changing in light of the threats towards us directly, but also because of the growing lack of respect of the international rules based order. Our DNA is no longer the DNA of a body that mainly aims at bringing people together, that fosters international trade and supports fundamental rights. We have been perceived long time as ‘a payer, but not as player’. The EU is strengthening its work on security and defence.

This goes together with the wish not only by Members of the European Parliament but also by many of our Member States and the European Commission, to be clearer on our objectives and red lines and less ready for compromise in our foreign policy, including our foreign

trade policy. We may not like this, we may not find it justifiable, but we have to recognise this as political reality.

This is the context, within which the new GSP+ regime is currently elaborated. You may know that the European Commission had added 6 international conventions applicable for the new regime as from 2014, in addition to the 27 already existing. The six conventions pertain greater accessibility for people with physical disability, the eradication of child labour, labour inspection and tripartite consultations, and environmental safety.

In its recent debates the European Parliament is considering even three requirements more. Two referring to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), i.e. (1) the recognition of the competence of the UN Human Rights Council to consider complaints from individuals, and (2) the objective to abolish the death penalty. The third requirement is the recognition of the *International Criminal Court* - ICC (for genocide, crime against humanity, war crimes and crimes of aggression). These additional three conventions clearly show the wish to secure the international rules based order through our foreign policy.

Debates in Brussels are ongoing, and the final Regulation can be expected before the end of the year. The debates

may lead to a different result and some of the requirements just mentioned may be taken away again. Whatever the outcome of the legislative process will be, Pakistan needs to explain its position, reserves and concerns to all stakeholders in Brussels. Mutual understanding and detailed knowledge on the side of the EU lawmaker about the current problems of Pakistan and the political and economic specificities of the country are indispensable for Pakistan to be granted GSP+ status also beyond 2023.

I personally have no doubt on the seriousness with which the Government is currently pursuing its policy on Human rights. Prime Minister Shebahz Sharif made this very clear several times, not least when, in its *Address to the Nation* on Friday, he referred to the rights and the protection of minorities, an area that is particular important for the Europeans. I have reassured him [and the Minister of Commerce] of our commitment to working together with the federal and the provincial governments with regard to the new GSP+ regime taking fully into account underlying sensitivities on the Pakistani side.

*[Ladies and Gentlemen]* So far, I have been mostly speaking of obligations that fall on the State of Pakistan with regard to GSP+. For the future, I am convinced that producers, businesses and traders can no longer be benefitting from GSP+ without contributing themselves

to Human rights, labour rights and the combat against climate change. They will have to respect and implement human rights in their enterprises, and to play an active role in building a sustainable economy and society.

They will need to identify and, where necessary, prevent, end or mitigate adverse impacts on their activities on human rights, such as child labour and exploitation of workers, and on the environment, including the combat of climate change. We can call this due diligence duties for corporate sustainability. I am aware that the scale and the complexity through which enterprises meet that responsibility may vary according to size, sector, operational context and also to ownership structure.

Employers may raise concerns this would increase production costs and make products less competitive. Experience in European factories and businesses have shown that the implementation of human rights and labour law has led to higher commitment of the workforce. Consumers chose more and more goods that have been produced in compliance with Human rights and international labour law standards. I am fully convinced that over time, Pakistan will also go this way.

Let me clarify that the responsibilities of enterprises I have just outlined, are not part of the current GSP+ regime. They are an outlook in the future and should be

understood as encouragement to all sides, to increase the conditions for more and better quality trade.

Together, we should also look at more diversification of the products we trade. This will help maintain and expand those international supply chains, which Pakistan is part of. The increase of the EU's bilateral trade with Pakistan is one of our key policy objectives in our bilateral relations for the next few years. It will help Pakistan to increase revenues from outside and create jobs inside (Pakistan). It will lead to economic growth, which is so much needed. For the EU, it is one of the most effective tools to act against poverty and Pakistan will be able to reduce cost intensive social support measures, such as currently carried out by the *Benazir Bhutto Support Programme* and others.

In conclusion:

The EU is committed to working with Pakistan to increase our bilateral trade and to make it more Human rights compliant and sustainable. The country has much untapped potential in various economic areas of which trade with the EU can only benefit.

GSP+ beyond 2023 is possible for Pakistan. The Government has ensured the EU that all efforts to show compliance with the high requirements would be made. Close cooperation with us will help us reach this goal in the ultimate interest of the citizens of Pakistan.