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I have followed developments in Burma very closely for many years, particularly in relation to the issue of forced labour in that country. I wish to, therefore, raise with you the importance I attach to the need for some appropriate response from the WTO.

The ILO, in its report, "Forced Labour in Myanmar (Burma)", of 2nd July 1998, found that there was substantial evidence showing the "*pervasive use of forced labour*" by government authorities.

The report also stated that government officials treat the "*civilian population as an unlimited pool of unpaid forced labourers and servants at their disposal*". The ILO concluded, "*Government, the military and the administration seem oblivious to the human rights of the people and are trampling upon them with impunity*".

Subsequent ILO investigations found that forced labour was still widespread, and on 30 November 2000, the organisation took the unprecedented step of calling on its members to review the relations they have with Burma, and take appropriate measures to ensure that Burma is unable to perpetuate, or extend, its use of forced, or compulsory, labour.

On 8 December 2000, a similar request was sent to the World Trade Organisation in a letter from the ILO Director General. Unfortunately, the WTO has not, to date, responded in any significant way to this request.

One year later, during the ILO High-Level visit to Burma in September and October 2001, investigators found that forced labour still exists. The ILO team concluded that the "*eradication of forced labour*" represented "*a fundamental moral and legal obligation*" on Burma.

On 26th February 2002, the ILO reported that the Burmese military regime had "*effectively blocked international efforts to halt the army's use of forced labour*". The military regime also denied ILO representatives access to Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace laureate, and leader of Burma's legitimately elected National League for Democracy.

The US State Department released its "Country Report on Human Rights Practices" on 4 March 2002. This report directly links forced labour in Burma to international trade. It states that:

*"Widespread forced labour, including forced child labour, continued to contribute materially to the construction and maintenance not only of irrigation facilities important to the cultivation of some export crops, including rice, but also of roads and some railroads important for the transportation of exports to ports. Forced labour, including forced child labour, has contributed materially to manufactured exports, including garments. There have been many credible reports that forced labour, including forced child labour, has been used widely since 1998 to clear and drain virgin lands and wetlands for the cultivation of crops, many of which, according to public descriptions of the Government's economic plans, are intended largely for export."*

In spite of overwhelming evidence that the Burmese regime continues to practice forced labour on a widespread and systematic basis, the military junta has maintained its membership of the WTO. In addition, the WTO has in no way censured, or criticised, the Burmese regime for practising forced labour, and maintains a 'business as usual' approach to the regime.

Indeed, the WTO provided Burma with "national treatment" protection throughout the period of the ILO's investigation, and actually continued to train Burmese military officials. This response clearly fundamentally undermines the credibility of the WTO

and its members, including European Union countries, and therefore needs to be urgently addressed.

On 13 December 1996, the WTO - in its Singapore Ministerial Declaration - pledged to, "*renew our commitment to the observance of internationally recognised core labour standards. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is the competent body to set and deal with these standards, and we affirm our support for its work in promoting them.*"

However, after many years and explicit evidence of the fact that forced labour in Burma remains endemic, the WTO has taken no action.

The suggestion, therefore, exists that the WTO accepts the Burmese regime's use of forced labour, and this, in my view, threatens the credibility of the multilateral trading system.

I trust that you will raise this matter at the WTO meetings which you and your services attend, and that you will keep me informed of any progress which is made.

**Glenys Kinnock MEP**

cc Commissioner Chris Patten