

EU promises to back off on EPA

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THE European Union (EU) has “no intention to put undue pressure” on Namibia to sign and implement an economic partnership agreement (EPA), EU Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht has said.

In a letter to trade activist Marc Maes, who last month petitioned De Gucht to back off, the Trade Commissioner said he took “careful note of the points and concerns” made.

The petition, which Maes compiled on behalf of 15 international non-governmental organisations, expressed the group’s concern “over the undue pressure on the Government of Namibia to sign the interim EPA while negotiations on the SADC EPA are still ongoing and contentious issues still remain outstanding”.

“Namibia’s concerns about the content of the initialed text are fully legitimate and should be respected by the EU,” Maes, the trade policy officer of the Coalition of the Flemish North-South Movement, wrote.

Namibia has been refusing to sign the controversial trade pact since 2007, insisting that the EU put certain concessions they agreed to, in writing. Until recently the EU has refused to do so, but De Gucht has in the meantime indicated that issues on food security, infant industry protection, free flow of goods and export taxes will be included in the final EPA.

In his letter to Maes, dated July 12, De Gucht said “the EU has no intention to put undue pressure on Namibia to sign and implement the interim EPA”.

“It still believes though that previous arrangements and flexibilities were negotiated and agreed in good faith and should be followed up,” he said.

The Trade Commissioner reminded Maes that Namibian beef, fish and grapes enjoy duty- and tariff-free access to EU markets “on the condition that the interim EPA will be concluded”.

“Signature and implementation of the agreement would enable Namibia to benefit from a long-term stable trade partnership and establish the required legal security for local and foreign investors and traders. It would also re-establish fairness towards other developing countries that are in a number of cases considerably poorer than Namibia but do not benefit from free access to EU markets,” De Gucht said.

He added that the EPAs “are intended to build on existing regional integration processes and strengthen them”.

One of the main concerns of Angola, Namibia and South Africa – the only countries in the SADC EPA configuration who have not signed the interim EPA yet – is that it will undermine regional integration.

De Gucht said that the EU “will continue to engage with Namibia, as well as with the whole SADC EPA group in a constructive spirit as in the past”.

“The objective is to negotiate an agreement that serves the region’s best interest,” he said.

De Gucht concluded the letter by saying that the aim is to conclude a comprehensive EPA with the whole SADC EPA region by the end of the year.

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