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Sri Lanka to apply for GSP Plus next month

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David Daly



Dr. Harsha de Silva



Nikolaos Zaimis

By Chandeepta Wettasinghe

The Sri Lankan government is likely to make its formal application for the European Union's (EU) General System of Preferences Plus (GSP Plus) facility next month, following Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's return to the country from his exploits in Davos, Switzerland.

"When the Prime Minister comes back next month, hopefully we will talk to him about what went on with the delegation yesterday and maybe then make our formal application for GSP Plus," Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister Dr. Harsha de Silva said. Speaking at a forum organised by the European Chamber of Commerce Sri Lanka last week, he noted that while the negotiations with the European Commission team currently in Sri Lanka have been tough, they have also been sincere.

"The application is now in the final stages, with 85-95 percent of the application now ready," Institute of Policy Studies Executive Director Dr. Saman Kelegama added.

European Union Ambassador David Daly had been consistently but subtly warning Sri Lanka that regaining GSP Plus is not as easy as the politicians in Sri Lanka would have the public believe, since the country would have to follow 27 international conventions, several of which had been breached.

However, both Daly and EU Directorate General for Trade, Sustainable Development and GSP Deputy Head Nikolaos Zaimis were much more upbeat at the forum than in the past, saying that they were more positively inclined towards the Sri Lankan government following the recent negotiations.

"The old cycle of the relationship with the EU ended and a new cycle has begun since 2015. We are excited to see the GSP Plus scheme in Sri Lanka again," Zaimis said.

Daly said that it was refreshing to see the recent negotiations including not just diplomats but officials from multiple sectors. He added that while progress had been made, much more was needed to be achieved and that the 'cake must be baked at home'.

"The cake is just about to be taken out of the oven. You will find that the cake is not just going to be edible but very tasty. Sometimes you may say certain things at the political platform but I'm glad that you have said that things are progressing," Dr. de Silva said in response.

Meanwhile, Zaimis said that after making the formal application, the European Council (EC) would evaluate it for six months, after which, if the EC is satisfied, would act as the lawyers, defending Sri Lanka's application as it is forwarded to the EU Parliament.

The EU Parliament will debate for two months prior to passing a resolution. However, this period could be extended for up to four months, which would mean that if applied in February, whether GSP Plus is granted would be known by either October or December of this year. The original plan of the new government was to apply for GSP Plus before the end of 2015 and receive the facility by mid-2016.

However, even the EU fisheries ban, which was imposed earlier in 2015, has not yet been fully resolved. Daly in the past said that it was detrimental for such issues to persist when making the application.

Prince Zeid's visit crucial

The visit of United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights Prince Zeid Al-Hussein to Sri Lanka next month will be one of the most crucial checkpoints for the GSP Plus, Zaimis said.

“If it goes well, then it’s good, if it goes badly, then it’s bad... Trade without human rights cannot exist,” he said. Zaimis said that GSP Plus is an economic policy utilized to promote the Western values of human rights, labour rights and environmental issues in developing markets.

“The government will have to spend to improve these. The GSP Plus exists to recover some of these costs. Use the funds from trading to promote these values in the country,” he added.

He said that Sri Lanka lost the GSP Plus in 2010 due to the Mahinda Rajapaksa government not co-operating with the UN by not allowing foreign investigators to ascertain the situation in the country and not following several UN international conventions.

Sentiments similar to the past regime have been resurfacing recently, despite the dominant United National Party pushing hard to regain the GSP Plus.

“We are in a coalition government for the first time in history. There are some issues we need to sort out,” Dr. de Silva, who is a UNP member, said.

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