

Concerning the reply from EFTA to our call for action dated 4 March

We are grateful that the Norwegian government, as well as other governments of the EFTA countries, express concerns regarding the situation in Hong Kong, specifically regarding the deterioration in human rights. We take every opportunity to encourage our government to take part, and also take on a leading role, in the multilateral condemnations of the imposition of a dictatorial rule and the incarcerations of political prisoners in Hong Kong.

Our original letter to EFTA had a focus on the implications that this situation has on the commitments all parties have signed up to in the EFTA-Hong Kong Free Trade Agreement (FTA). EFTA's reply leaves us wondering about the sincerity of the verbal criticism that EFTA refers to. Our inquiry was basically answered in one sentence only:

“Regarding the FTA, the EFTA States expect all contracting partners to act in accordance with the commitment to common values they reaffirmed in the preamble.”

It is deeply troubling that EFTA takes so lightly on the commitment to democracy. In our original letter we explained why this commitment is quintessential to the fact that Hong Kong can enter into FTAs in the first place. Why has no action beyond words been taken in response to the crackdown on civil and political rights in Hong Kong? How can Norway as a member of EFTA fail to keep the Hong Kong government accountable for ending “one country, two systems”, and for persecuting its entire opposition?

“Expecting partners to act in accordance with commitments” is no longer a relevant response. With the present situation, the least we can expect from EFTA is a public announcement that EFTA will re-evaluate the FTA due to the Hong Kong government's total failure to uphold civil liberties, thus crushing all commitments to democracy and the rule of law.

The expressed commitment in the FTA is not to engage in conversation. Yet, that is clearly how low EFTA is setting the bar for the Hong Kong government. In its response, all EFTA has to show for are words from statements that are demonstrably useless for the suffering Hongkongers.

Alarmingly, the parties' explicit commitments in the written agreement apparently carry no weight, as EFTA seems to be prepared to continue keeping the FTA alive no matter how miserably the Hong Kong government fails to live up to its commitments. In the short term, no action will improve the situation in Hong Kong. For the longer term however, it is important that Norway and EFTA hold the Hong Kong government accountable. A flagrant violation of the terms set out in the Free Trade Agreement calls for a relevant reaction. The only relevant reaction with the present state of affairs in Hong Kong is to announce that EFTA can no longer continue with its FTA with Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government has defaulted on its commitments.

It is difficult to put into words our frustration with the lacklustre response we received from EFTA. We encourage the Norwegian government to take on a proactive role.