

Day 3: Ministers show 'political energy' for ending Doha Round

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SEVENTH WTO MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE

WTO ministers ended their two-and-a-half-day Geneva conference on 2 December 2009 having declared that they want to try to conclude the Doha Round talks quickly and agreeing to extend "moratoriums" on electronic commerce and intellectual property.

Political energy for Doha Round

Although this conference was not designed for negotiations, almost all ministers said they wanted the Doha Round talks to achieve an agreement soon, a large number them calling for this to be done by the end of 2010.

These calls were made in formal plenary meetings and in informal working sessions.

"Ministers reaffirmed the need to conclude the Round in 2010 and for a stock-taking exercise to take place in the first quarter of next year," the conference chair, Chilean Economy Minister Andrés Velasco, told delegations when he summed up the meeting for delegations.

"There was support for asking senior officials to continue to work to map the road towards that point. Gaps remain on substance and there was wide acknowledgment of the need for leadership and engagement on the remaining specific issues over the coming weeks."

He also stressed: "There was strong convergence on the importance of trade and the Doha Round to economic recovery and poverty alleviation in developing countries. The development dimension should remain central to the Round and particular attention should be paid to issues of importance to developing countries."

WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy told a press conference afterwards that the desire ministers expressed to conclude the Doha Round quickly has provided the "political energy" to organize work for the coming months.

This work "roadmap" will be drawn up when senior officials from members' capitals come to Geneva in mid-December, with the aim of setting the tasks for the first quarter of 2010.

The date of the end of the first quarter arises because if members can agree on "modalities" — the formulas and other outlines that form the blueprint for the final agreement in agriculture and non-agricultural market access — by that time, they could reach a final agreement by the end of the year. Several ministers repeated their desire to see the talks end by then.

Asked whether this is realistic, Mr Lamy said “my view is that it’s perfectly do-able,” but whether or not it will be achieved is up to the members.

Decisions

“Moratoriums” are agreements not to take certain actions. In electronic commerce, the ministers are agreeing not to charge import duties on electronic transmissions. Since the last time they met in Geneva in 1998, the ministers have agreed not to impose the duties from one Ministerial Conference to the next. The latest decision extends the moratorium further until the next meeting, which they have decided to hold in 2011.

A similar extension was agreed in intellectual property. Members agreed not to bring “non-violation” cases to the WTO dispute settlement process — “non-violation” is shorthand for the technical question of whether there can be legal grounds for complaint under the WTO’s intellectual property agreement, even when the agreement has not been violated.

Members also agreed to hold the next Ministerial Conference in 2011. It instructed the General Council — which comprises all members at the level of ambassador — to hold consultations on the election of officers (chair, three vice chairs, etc) for the 2011 meeting. And it acknowledged a report from the General Council on the activities of the various councils and committees.

Working session: WTO’s contribution

Earlier in the day, they held a second working session, this time on “the WTO’s contribution to recovery, growth and development

Comments covered a wide range of topics, but many speakers welcomed the WTO Secretariat’s recent series of reports monitoring governments’ trade measures particularly since the current financial crisis broke out.

Several speakers saw this monitoring as a new and useful development in the WTO’s role. They said this is useful both as a means of making information available, and for countries to exercise peer pressure on each other to avoid a damaging protectionist reaction to the economic crisis.

The reports show that “the system has held fast,” one minister said.

They noted that the measures governments have introduced are within their commitments and in many cases include further liberalization. Some also welcomed the fact that some of the reports have been prepared in cooperation with other international organizations.

Many speakers also described the swift conclusion to the current Doha Round negotiations as an essential stimulus package that does not draw on governments’ budgets and a further insurance policy against protectionism. Several repeated their call for an agreement in the Round by the end of 2010.

A few described an additional reason for wanting to conclude the Round quickly. They said the WTO should move on to newer issues such as climate change. A number, from both developed and developing countries, also called for stronger Aid-for-Trade and related activities to help developing countries adjust to economic circumstances and benefit from the Doha Round’s outcome.

Among the other topics mentioned were: trade and social issues; increasing dialogue with civil society, strengthening third-party rights in disputes, sharpening the WTO's analytical ability to look at value-added aspects of trade, the role of services liberalization in development and the impact of sectoral stimulus packages; non-tariff barriers such as product standards; tackling private sector standards such as "food miles" and "carbon miles"; regional trade agreements; technology transfer; trade finance; promoting equity; investment and competition policy; speeding up membership negotiations and making them more transparent.

The comments followed a suggestion from the conference chairperson, Chilean Economy Minister Andrés Velasco, that members discuss: the WTO's monitoring and analytical function; "coherence" (i.e., international organizations working together) and international governance; institutional and systemic issues such as how to improve the way the WTO functions and to ensure that it is transparent for farmers, businesses and parliamentarians; and other questions such as the "tremendous challenge of climate change".

At the end, the chair thanked Switzerland and Geneva on behalf of the ministers for making the conference possible.

Source WTO