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## **WTO**

### **Farming issues take center stage at talks**

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By Elaine Kurt Enbach

Associated Press

**HONG KONG** - It all seems to be boiling down to a food fight.

By dollar value, farming accounts for only a small slice of the world economic pie, but its critical role in the lives of billions of people has thrust it to the fore of WTO talks being held in Hong Kong this week. An impasse over the issue threatens to block a global trade agreement.

Many attending the talks, which began Tuesday -- or watching from a distance -- took aim at the European Union, saying it must pledge to open its markets further to foreign agricultural products and slash subsidies.

"It is ironic that while farming represents only 1 percent of the U.S. economy and 2 percent of the European economy, we're having to become experts on agricultural trade," said John Murphy, vice president for international affairs of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

U.S. agriculture groups echoed those calls, urging that EU open its markets wider to their own products.

"We have a difficult time accessing the European market for dairy products. The EU needs to go further," said Tom Camerlo, chairman of the U.S. Dairy Export Council, at a briefing in Hong Kong.

EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson has said the European Union won't change its offer of an average 46 percent cut in farm tariffs unless developing nations make counteroffers on reducing trade barriers on manufactured goods and services.

The focus on food -- staff of life, stuff of ritual and tradition -- was highlighted Tuesday when several dozen protesters, mainly South Korean farmers, struck security forces with bamboo sticks, tried to ram through a police roadblock and jumped into Victoria Harbor in an attempt to swim a few hundred meters to the WTO venue.

"We are here to protest the WTO because the WTO wants to impose other country's rice and food on South Korea. If the WTO allows imports of foreign rice and food into Korea, 100 percent of 3.5 million Korean farmers will die," said Tae-sook Lee, head of a South Korean farmers' association.

The scene was much calmer inside the convention center, though food remained the topic of the day.

"It is clear that agriculture negotiations are front and center," said R. Scott Miller, director of government relations for Proctor & Gamble Co. "Agriculture is the light switch. We've got to flip that switch to go forward."

The Hong Kong talks originally were meant to lay the groundwork for a treaty concluding the so-called Doha Round of trade negotiations but have instead bogged down in fighting mainly over farm trade.

Camerlo, of the dairy council, was among dozens of U.S. farm industry representatives who traveled to Hong Kong from the American Midwest to lobby WTO delegates -- farmers who said they expect to lose export subsidies and other government support but want in exchange to get freer access to markets in Europe and the developing world.

Other farm groups, such as the National Farmers Union, meanwhile joined in a call for more protection, saying that slashing agricultural subsidies and tariffs could drive many U.S. farms and ranches out of business.

"Free trade will make it impossible for farmers to meet their society's legitimate expectations concerning food security and safety as well as environmental, animal welfare and rural issues," said a "joint declaration" issued Tuesday by groups from Japan, Korea, India, Europe and 10 African countries, including tiny Burkino-Faso.

The groups contend that free trade would help large-scale corporate farms while wiping out the livelihoods of farmers in poorer developing nations. But they also include a politically powerful and vocal farm minorities in rich countries, such as Japan's JA Zenchu, who have long lobbied against opening their markets to foreign competition.

With the talks barely underway, it was too early to predict if the Hong Kong talks will move beyond the issue of farm trade by the time they end on Sunday, said Seiichi Kondo, Japan's ambassador for international trade and economics.

"We have to . . . roll up our sleeves and work on agriculture," Kondo said. "Some people insist other issues should go in parallel. But you have to put one foot first to move."