

Posted on Fri, Dec. 16, 2005
HONG KONG

Delegates of poor nations unite at WTO summit

Top trade officials from more than 110 poor countries strive to form a united stance on trade negotiations.

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Associated Press

HONG KONG - Developing countries were closing ranks Thursday to push their agenda at this week's global trade talks as the United States and the European Union traded charges with time running out to broker a global trade deal that could lift millions out of poverty.

Top trade officials from more than 110 poor countries planned to meet this morning at the World Trade Organization meeting to forge a common negotiating stance on some of their vital concerns, said Madun Dello, the trade minister from the tiny African nation of Mauritius.

"We may come forward before you with a joint statement after the meeting," Dello said. He said poor countries needed to work more closely to make sure the development agenda of the so-called Doha round of trade talks remains in focus.

So far, the talks, mired in an impasse over the thorny issue of agricultural trade, have offered little hope to poor countries, a World Bank official said Thursday.

Meetings this week in Hong Kong aimed at laying the groundwork for a WTO treaty on freer trade have paid lip service to the world's poorest but have failed to break a deadlock over tariffs on farm products from developing nations, said Danny Leipziger, a vice president of the bank.

"The major trading economies of the developed world are keeping the big issues off the table, and as long as that happens, the poor will suffer; they will not get the chance they need to earn more from selling their goods on world markets," he said.

Developing nations decided to join forces after the United States and Japan backtracked on a proposal to allow duty-free and quota-free imports from 32 of the least developed countries. The proposal is a key component of the current round of trade talks that were launched in Qatar's capital in 2001 particularly to address the concerns of poor nations, which say they had lost out in previous WTO negotiations.

The least developed countries, which have an annual per capita income of less than \$750, want duty-free access for all products, but the United States and Japan say they want to be able to limit the list of products and countries.

For instance, the United States is reluctant to give duty-free access to textile products from Bangladesh. Japan has problems with putting rice on the list.

U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman said Thursday that it would be difficult for him to defend duty-free access for Bangladeshi textiles.

Developing nations are hoping their united front will pressure the United States and Japan to make more concessions on the issue.

Agricultural issues have been the major obstacle in the six-day talks, now half-way over, and continue to hold up progress on reaching an broad agreement that would slash trade barriers around the world.