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WTO chief: Negotiators must make

MAR. 21 2:44 P.M. ET Negotiators need to make significant progress in a short period of time if they are to meet a deadline for a wide-ranging treaty to liberalize global commerce, the WTO chief said Monday.

Speaking at a meeting at the World Trade Organization's headquarters in Geneva, Director-General Supachai Panitchpakdi told trade negotiators that political commitment to concluding the current trade liberalization round was good, but that often it failed to deliver results at the negotiating table.

"We must make greater efforts to translate the positive input of ministers and senior officials into give-and-take in the detailed negotiations here in Geneva," Supachai said. "It is a cause for concern that we do not always seem able to bring the political commitment that I have witnessed around the world fully into our work here."

WTO members are aiming to produce an accord at a year-end summit in Hong Kong, which could lead to a binding trade liberalization treaty by the end of 2006.

"There is an immense amount of progress to be made in a very short time if we are to achieve our objectives for Hong Kong," Supachai said.

In January, ministers from 25 key trading nations -- including the United States, European Union, Canada, Brazil and India -- agreed to energize talks. Although they stopped short of setting detailed targets, they agreed on the need to prepare a draft text by the end of July.

"We now have a high level of convergence on the need for a substantial breakthrough in Hong Kong in key areas," Supachai said, adding that meetings in Geneva in July will be "a marker in our process."

In 2001, the plan was to create a new global trade treaty by the end of 2004. But a WTO conference in 2003 collapsed amid bickering over investment rules between rich and poor members, as well as differences on agriculture.

High-level meetings in Geneva in July 2004 finally led to a framework accord on cutting tariffs in agricultural trade, as well as export subsidies that have helped farmers in rich nations and undercut their poor country competitors.