

Editorial: Renewed Pledge

This weekend, the G-8 (the US, Britain, France, Japan, Germany, Canada, Italy and Russia) provided the year's first political call for the conclusion of the Doha Round of trade negotiations. At their meeting in Rome, the G-8 finance ministers confirmed their commitment to avoid implementing protectionist measures and refrain from raising new trade barriers while "working towards a quick and ambitious conclusion of the Doha Round." Although less specific than the November 15, 2008, G-20 Heads of States' statement, this declaration could be seen as a good indication of the Obama administration's support for the Doha Round, especially following the watering down of the "buy American" language in the US stimulus package in an effort to make it consistent with the US's international trade obligations.

Agriculture Talks Slowly Recommencing

The first 2009 agriculture negotiations meeting of the full membership took place on February 12. The gathering provided delegates with their first opportunity to discuss the agriculture negotiations since Chairman Crawford Falconer circulated his fourth revision of the draft modalities text on December 6, 2008. At the meeting, Falconer told members that he has started consulting with various coalitions and individual members, and that he will continue to do so over the next few weeks in order to ascertain which issues members want to discuss. If a clear agenda of issues results from these consultations, he will likely reconvene the "Room E" series of meetings.

"Carousel Consultations"

Falconer reported that he has held separate "carousel" consultations with coalitions (G-10, G-20, G-33 etc) and their coordinators, as well as with individual delegations, which have focused on how the talks should proceed. In his fax to delegations on February 10, Falconer informed members that he would hold two more rounds of "carousel" consultations to look at substance and to provide groups with the opportunity to react to his December 6, 2008 draft modalities and identify to him the topics they would like to see on future meeting agendas. Feedback has already been slowly trickling in: last week, the G-33 group of developing countries circulated a paper outlining their concerns with the chair's proposed special safeguard mechanism provision for small and vulnerable economies.

Based on the number of coalitions and other interested parties, Falconer has estimated that the next two rounds of "carousel" consultations could take about a month. Once completed, the chair intends to hold another meeting of the full membership to share information and decide how to move the process forward. That said, at some stage members will need to resume the more traditional "Room E" negotiation format involving a representative group of around 30 delegations; Falconer said that the current global environment calls for this type of meeting rather than a return to the "walk in the woods" consultation format.

Lamy at the G-8 Finance Ministers Meeting in Rome

On February 14, WTO Director General Lamy was invited to speak at the G-8 financial ministers meeting in Rome. Sources report that he delivered a speech about the food crisis and development issues which urged G-8 members to assist emerging and developing countries' access to credit and trade financing. Lamy also secured the G-8 ministers' support for a quick conclusion of the Doha Round. In their statement, the finance ministers stressed that they remained committed "to avoiding protectionist measures, which would only exacerbate the downturn, to refraining from raising new barriers and to working towards a quick and ambitious conclusion of the Doha Round" as it could play an important role in the global plan to put the derailing economy back on track.

In a Wall Street Journal op-ed published on February 11, Lamy lauded the international trading system for working effectively against protectionism while lifting millions out of poverty and fostering “better relations between countries.” He argued that this is why WTO members, and particularly those participating in the G-20 Summit, should refrain from implementing protectionism measure but rather view trade as part “of the solution to the economic downturn.”

Although WTO identified nothing dramatic in its first report on measures taken by countries in the context of the economic crisis, the DG cautioned members that it is still early in the crisis and urged them to remain “vigilant.” The second WTO monitoring report is due mid-March, just before the G-20 Heads of State Summit in London on April 2. Sources said this second report will likely focus on the details of developed countries’ stimulus packages.

Upcoming Events

- General Council, May 27-28, July 28-29, Oct. 13-14, Dec. 17-18, 2009
- G-20’s Second Meeting, April 2, 2009 (London, England)
- Official Appointment of the WTO’s DG, May 31, 2009
- India General Elections, May 2009 (at the latest)
- EU Elections, June 7, 2009
- OECD Ministerial Meeting, June 24-25, 2009 (Paris, France)
- APEC Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Trade, July 21-22, 2009 (Singapore)
- G-8 Summit, July 8-10, 2009 (La Maddalena, Italy)

Geneva Watch is published by Dairy Farmers of Canada, Chicken Farmers of Canada, Canadian Egg Marketing Agency, Canadian Turkey Marketing Agency and Canadian Hatching Egg Producers to report on the various events occurring in Geneva, particularly on the WTO negotiations on agriculture.

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