

Editorial: Doha Slowly Picking-up Speed

The face-to face meeting between US Trade Representative Ron Kirk and India's Commerce Minister Anand Sharma on the sidelines of the Cairns Group ministerial gathering provided fresh political momentum to push the Doha agenda forward. The Cairns gathering was the first step in a series of meetings aiming at building a strong political engagement from key members in support of an early harvest of modalities by the end of 2009. Achieving this feat has proved to be difficult in the past but pro-Doha advocates find solace in what appears to be a renewed engagement from both India and the US in the multilateral process. Much remains to be done before Doha could be considered a done deal but if enough progress – both on the political and technical front – is achieved by the time the G-20 heads of state meet in Pittsburgh on September 20, Lamy could find himself with yet another strong green light to try to close modalities by year end.

Cairns Group¹ Ministerial Meeting

The June 7-9 Cairns Group meeting in Bali (Indonesia) injected much needed political impetus to re-start the Doha negotiations which have been slowed down by elections in both the U.S. and India. With the two countries' top trade envoy attending the gathering as special guests, the Cairns Group requested that negotiators reconvene in Geneva as soon as possible "to map out a clear path towards the conclusion of the negotiations, and to start down that path before the European summer break," which in essence means recommencing technical consultations on some of the outstanding issues remaining in both agriculture and non agricultural market access (NAMA). Both US Trade Representative Ron Kirk and Indian Commerce Minister Anand Sharma supported the Cairns Group suggested process, even though the group blamed the US (and the EU) for having reintroduced export subsidies in dairy (the so-called US Dairy Export Incentive Program).

"Picking up the pieces from where they are and moving forward"

The opportunity to bring together USTR Ron Kirk and India's Commerce Minister Anand Sharma to provide a little political engagement in the current sluggish process remains the main "achievement" of this ministerial gathering. Both ministers said they are willing to conclude Doha, albeit by the end of 2010. "To the United States, a successful conclusion will mean an ambitious and balanced result with new market openings for all, and significant contributions to global economic recovery and long-term economic growth and development," Kirk stressed in a statement following the meeting. "While we should not discard the progress made to date in the Doha round, we must consider new ideas to get these talks moving again," he added. The US is asking for additional market access concessions from emerging developing countries (Brazil, India, China and South Africa) particularly in the NAMA sectorals. The USTR has called for a new pragmatic approach to unlock the current deadlock in the technical discussions.

Sharma, for his part, claimed that "there are no obstacles which are insurmountable" suggesting India was ready to engage once again and "pick up the pieces from where they are and move forward." Director General Pascal Lamy was delighted to see the two key countries engaging in the process again. "We had not had that clear signal of reset until now," he said. But sources say they are waiting to see what concessions the US will be willing to make in order to move Doha forward. For Brazil's ambassador to the WTO, Roberto Azevedo, this new engagement means making additional cuts in US domestic support. As Kirk put it, "it will take some creativity, and quiet and informal work by ministers and by senior officials," to be able to pull this off.

¹ Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, South Africa, Thailand and Uruguay

Hypothetical Timeline for Completing Scheduling

Both Agriculture and NAMA chairmen have set out plans to organize a training session focusing on scheduling, i.e. a technical session on how to prepare the comprehensive list of commitments as a result of the negotiations - to be held before the WTO summer break (July 14 for NAMA, no date floated for Agriculture). In preparation for this exercise, NAMA chair Luzius Wasescha has convened some delegates to attend an information session that sets out procedures and timelines for submission and verification of schedules. The exercise, some delegates said, was very complicated. The secretariat is set to run a second session with the aim of getting members involved early in the scheduling process by providing fictional examples. With that in mind, the secretariat has outlined a tentative timeline for completing the scheduling and verification phase.

1. “(...) The timeline for preparation and verification of schedules is as follows:
 - Two weeks after agreement on modalities: circulation by WTO Secretariat of electronic negotiating files (ENFs)
 - At latest two months after agreement on modalities: requests for assistance by WTO secretariat in preparing schedules
 - Three months after agreement on modalities: circulation by WTO Secretariat of electronic comprehensive draft schedules (ECDSs) prepared by Members
 - Three and a half months after circulation of ECDSs (six and a half months after agreement on modalities): submission of revised schedules following verification
 - Five months after circulation of ECDSs (eight months after agreement on modalities): conclusion of verification process.
2. Thus, in the hypothetical case that an agreement on modalities was to be reached by the end of December 2009, the timeline would be:

Mid-January 2010: circulation of ENFs

Latest, end-February 2010: requests for assistance

End-March 2010: circulation of ECDSs

Mid-July 2010: submission of revised schedules following verification

End-August 2010: conclusion of verification process and subsequent circulation of final schedules on Agriculture, NAMA, Other Duties and Charges, and NTMs.”

Upcoming Events

- Agriculture Negotiations Informal Meeting, June 18, 2009
- General Council, July 28-29, Oct. 13-14, Dec. 17-18, 2009
- OECD Ministerial Meeting, June 24-25, 2009 (Paris, France)
- G-8 Summit, July 8-10, 2009 (L'Aquila, Italy)
- NAMA Week, week of July 13, 2009
- APEC Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Trade, July 21-22, 2009 (Singapore)
- WTO Public Forum, Sept 28-30, 2009
- G-20 Summit, September 20 (Pittsburgh, USA)



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