

Editorial: Don't Believe the Hype

Much ado has been made about India's Commerce Minister, Anand Sharma's declaration that "the impasse" between the U.S. and India on the Doha negotiations "has been broken". The two countries are at the heart of the current deadlock, not having been able to sort out their differences on the critical issue of the special safeguard mechanism last December. True, both countries have completed their elections and have named rather "conciliatory" diplomats at the top of their respective trade ministries. But, to jump from there to a claim that the two key players are on the verge of some sort of "Blair House" understanding that would lead to set up concrete actions toward a successful round at the June 23–25 OECD ministerial meeting is one tough pill to swallow. This is merely political rhetoric aiming at showing a positive stance on the trade file in advance of the concrete technical negotiations that are not anticipated before the second half of 2009.

Agriculture Negotiations Informal Meeting

Agriculture negotiations' chair, David Walker, announced on June 18th that the agriculture talks will restart at the multilateral level reflecting members' wish to move the negotiations forward and to close the gaps that remain in their positions. Walker, who described members' repeated statements to restart negotiations as "very much music to my ears", plans to organize some consultations on outstanding issues such as the special safeguard mechanism and tariff simplification in July before holding another gathering of the full membership prior to the organization's summer break.

In order to meet members' desire to see the talks pick up momentum again in preparation for intensive negotiations in the autumn, the chair plans to organize room E/D type sessions with about 20-30 delegations representing all key players and coalitions to take place the week of June 29th. Walker said he is about to complete the exploratory consultations he has held with individual delegations and representatives of coalitions since his election as chair on April 22th.

Officials reported that these meetings will help clarify members' views on which issues are political (to be decided at a political level for example by ministers), which are technical (to be settled by officials), and which are political but would benefit from some technical work. The chair believes it would be up to members to decide that—he would not decide "exogenously".

Scheduling workshop

Walker also informed delegates that he would organize a technical workshop sometime in July to consider the type of information members would need to supply when they spell out their specific commitments. As Brazilian ambassador to the WTO, Roberto Azevedo explained, this exercise would determine the "shape" of the schedule rather of what will be in it. "Walker tried to clarify that because delegates thought he was suggesting going to scheduling". The purpose of this technical workshop would be to identify what data are needed for each of the items in the modalities, but not the actual data, or even the products they would apply to, many delegates, but especially developing members, are worried that this exercise hides another purpose—to get them early into scheduling. Walker assured that he was looking for the "type" of information and not the information itself.

However, even though most members seem willing to accept the technical workshop, some said they opposed using the discussion to do more than its basic objective, and a few specifically opposed jumping straight to supplying the data itself before modalities are agreed upon.

Walker said members would be free to discuss bilaterally or plurilaterally some form of “outcome testing”, as described by WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy. But, he stressed, this would not be part of the agriculture negotiations, which he chairs. “That is not a process that is of relevance to me,” he said. Speaking on behalf of the G-20, Azevedo declared that the group, like many other delegations, favours using the December 2008 draft modalities text as “the basis for resuming negotiations” as it represents “the end-game in terms of the landing zones.” The group warns against “a selective reopening of the package” and rejects “the notion that any member is worse-off in this negotiation,” clearly referring to the U.S. which has repeatedly claimed having conceded too much in terms of domestic support while receiving too little in terms of market access. “Over the last seven years, every member negotiated, made concessions and trade-offs. Every member feels that it has given more than it could and has gotten less than it should,” the G-20 said.

G-20's Trade Ministers to Meet in India

In their continuous effort to unlock the current negotiations' deadlock, U.S. Trade Representative, Ron Kirk and India Commerce Minister, Anand Sharma held a second head-to-head meeting in Washington on June 17th to try to narrow their differences on some of the talks' outstanding issues. Sharma, who claimed that “the impasse has been broken”, is likely to invite a group of G-20 (i.e. financial crisis group) Trade Ministers to India prior to the third gathering of world leaders in Pittsburgh on September 24-25. The meeting will be the last attempt to inject political energy into the negotiations, following a series of summer ministerial gatherings: the OECD Forum in Paris, the G-8 summit in L'Aquila and the APEC meeting in Singapore.

Upcoming Events

- OECD Ministerial Meeting, June 23-25, 2009 (Paris, France)
- Agriculture Room E/D meeting, expected week of June 29, 2009
- Agriculture Consultations (various formats) July, 2009
- Technical workshop on information for schedules, Exact date TBC
- G-8 Summit, July 8-10, 2009 (L'Aquila, Italy)
- NAMA Week, week of July 13, 2009
- Agriculture Open-Ended, TBC (toward end of July, 2009)
- APEC Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Trade, July 21-22, 2009 (Singapore)
- General Council, July 28-29, Oct. 13-14, Dec. 17-18, 2009
- G-20 Trade Ministers Meeting, September 2009 (TBC)
- G-20 Summit, September 24-25 (Pittsburgh, USA)
- WTO Public Forum, Sept 28-30, 2009
- WTO Ministerial Conference, November 30- December 2, 2009

Geneva Watch is published by Dairy Farmers of Canada, Chicken Farmers of Canada, Egg Farmers of Canada, Turkey Farmers of Canada 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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