

India's Statement at Trade Negotiations Committee meeting at the level of Heads of Delegations held on 27th February 2019

1. Thank you, DG, for convening this meeting and for your report and assessment as the Chair of the TNC. We also thank the Chairs of the Negotiating Groups for their reports.

State of Play

2. As we convene for the first informal meeting of the TNC this year, we face the grim reality that the challenges this organization is saddled with have only increased. Growing trade tensions, a slowdown of global trade, rise in protectionist measures, and widening trade disputes with a hostage Appellate Body have been further burdened with a potentially divisive debate on development.

3. While we will speak on development at the GC, let me share with you our thoughts and ideas on some other important issues and the way forward.

WTO Reforms

4. WTO reforms today occupy the centre stage of our discussions. Many Members are putting forth proposals and new ideas on WTO reforms. However, there is a lack of balance in the reform agenda which is, for us, a matter of serious concern. We would like to reiterate that in order to strengthen the WTO, reform proposals must promote inclusiveness and non-discrimination, build on trust, address the inequities and glaring asymmetries in existing agreements which are against the interest of developing countries and LDCs, and most urgently, as a first step, break the impasse in filling the vacancies in the Appellate Body.

Negotiating Agenda

5. As we intensify work on the negotiating track, it is of vital importance that we make tangible progress on unfinished business like adopting a permanent solution for public stockholding for food security for all developing countries and LDCs. This is an item of critical importance to address the fundamental issues of poverty, hunger and malnutrition leading to the achievement of SDGs 1 & 2. We would also like to caution that this important matter can progress only by building on the work done in the past, and cannot be buried under fresh and growing demands for additional information, leading to an infructuous debate on this mandated issue.

6. The world's oceans face the threat of unsustainable fishing due to years of exploitation by a few countries that provide huge subsidies to industrial fishing. On the contrary, countries like India provide minimal subsidy of less than US\$ 1 per week to each of its 2 million fisher folk. We believe that there can be nothing more unequal than giving equal treatment to such unequal situations.

7. We have been actively participating in the fishery subsidies negotiations in the hope that an equitable and balanced outcome will emerge, based on real and effective special and differential treatment. Our small subsidy schemes, which support livelihoods and prevent destitution of fishermen and which do not lend themselves to promoting large scale fishing, need to be protected while at the same time providing space for expansion of our fishing capacity to reach meaningful per capita catch levels.

Electronic Commerce

8. We note that some countries have recently announced that they will start plurilateral negotiations on trade related aspects of electronic commerce. We believe that negotiations on electronic commerce at the WTO is an idea whose time has not yet come ! In our view, these negotiations strike at the roots of the multilateral system and its mandate, and therefore, we are not persuaded to join them. We already have a multilateral work programme agreed to by Ministers at MCXI which we will pursue. The Government of India, in consultation with stake holders, is working on National E-Commerce Policy, to be finalized soon. This policy will inform our international engagements on this important subject.

Conclusion

9. To conclude, in our view, the topmost priority is to protect and preserve the system, fix the Appellate Body issue so that the independent dispute settlement mechanism, which has served us well and has been a strong pillar for enforcing trade rules, can function effectively. At the same time, we need to avoid debating contentious issues like differentiation which could be divisive, further reduce trust within the organization and appear to be doomed to end in a deadlock.

10. Let me assure you, DG, that in the rather gloomy scenario at Geneva, India will not be found wanting, in doing its best, to address the challenges that the WTO faces.
