

Virtual Informal HODs Meeting, April 17, 2020

Statement by India

Delivered by Ambassador/Permanent Representative, J.S. Deepak

Thank you, DG, for convening this virtual meeting and for your report. We also thank the GC Chair for his valuable inputs.

2. We are living through uncertain times and the present situation, not allowing for face to face meetings, may continue for a while. It is, therefore, important to deliberate on how we can organize our work in the days and months ahead.

3. To answer your first question, DG, India can agree to the conduct of informal meetings and exchange of views without formal decision-making, through virtual means, so that we remain engaged on important issues. However, let us be very clear that informal virtual meetings cannot translate into discussions on substantive negotiating issues that have implications on Members' policy.

4. We are also open to considering regular Committees seeking online written submissions, but only on non-negotiating agenda items. The timelines for submitting written responses need to be pragmatic and flexible.

5. As far as your second question is concerned, we do not think that it is feasible to conduct negotiations or adopt decisions on substantive negotiating issues through virtual meetings or written procedures. This is for the following four reasons: *First*, the lockdowns and social distancing norms imposed across most capitals, make it very challenging to coordinate with and receive substantive inputs from all relevant stakeholders. *Second*, our capitals are preoccupied with battling the current crisis and WTO negotiations are low on their priority, further constraining our ability to negotiate.

Third, the economic hardship, threat to food and livelihood security and other negative repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, may lead several WTO Members to re-assess their negotiating positions across different areas of the WTO's work. Therefore, to carry on with negotiations in a business as usual format does not make sense. *Fourth*, in a consensus-based organization such as the WTO, it is of fundamental importance that negotiations are transparent and inclusive. Not all Members are equally equipped for this because of the digital divide and resource constraints.

6. For these reasons, we strongly recommend that negotiations are postponed till the situation improves. The timelines for all negotiations, including for disciplines on fisheries subsidies, must also be readjusted in tandem with the revised timelines for MC12.

7. I thank you, DG.
