

Virtual General Council Meeting

29 May, 2020

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Statements by India - Delivered by Mr. J.S. Deepak, Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the WTO

Agenda : Report by the Chairman of the Trade Negotiations Committee (DG)

1. I thank the DG for his report and assessment as the Chair of the TNC.

State of Play

2. As many parts of the world continue to witness continued growth in Covid-19 infections and deaths, the primary focus of our governments is to ensure the health and safety of our citizens. The exigencies of the current crisis leave us with little bandwidth for negotiations. Moreover, several members have underlined the need to recalibrate their priorities and positions at the WTO to contain the economic and social fallout of the crisis. This makes negotiations in a business-as-usual format difficult. The need of the hour is to use this crisis as an opportunity to build a more inclusive, balanced and resilient multilateral trading system.

Way Forward

3. Our priorities at the WTO remain as follows :

One, the resolution of the Appellate Body impasse.

Two, a more effective and lasting way to ensure the food security of the most vulnerable and eliminate the historic asymmetries in AMS entitlements in the Agreement on Agriculture.

Three, the urgent need to build the digital capacities of developing countries and LDCs in areas like digital skills and broadband infrastructure so that the benefits of the e-commerce applications like e-education, tele-medicine, electronic payments and use of digital platforms for sourcing goods and services are available to everyone including in developing countries and LDCs. The requirement of new sources of revenue for developing countries including LDCs has also underlined the need for ending the e-commerce moratorium on imposing customs duties on electronic-transmissions.

Four, the completion of negotiations on disciplines on fisheries subsidies with appropriate special and differential treatment for developing countries including LDCs to protect their small and subsistence fishermen.

Five, enable the effective use of TRIPs flexibilities to ensure access to essential medicines, treatments and vaccines to all at affordable prices, especially in the context of the Covid19 pandemic.

Farewell

4. On a more personal note, it is time for me to say goodbye as I head back to India on the completion of my tenure. It has been a privilege working with distinguished colleagues and delegates as well as outstanding professionals from the Secretariat. I will always cherish this experience. I would like to thank everyone for their friendship and cooperation extended to me and my delegation.

5. During the last 3 years, the WTO has faced some of the most challenging times. The paralysis of the WTO and its consequential ineffectiveness is not any longer a theoretical possibility; it may turn into a tragic reality. We have, together to ensure that this does not happen!

6. India has always valued the multilateral trading system embodied by the WTO, not because it has given us special advantages but for its many achievements. The WTO has kept markets open, till recently prevented trade wars, contributed to global growth bringing hundreds of millions out of poverty and served as a global public good. Even more importantly, it has huge potential of ushering in economic growth, especially for people in the shadows of life and for countries on the margins of development. It will be a sad day indeed, and a lost opportunity, if it fails to deliver on this promise.

7. Chair, my best wishes to all. I leave with the belief that the ability and wisdom represented in this group will help the WTO weather many storms and under your guidance the rules based multilateral trading system will not only endure but will also prevail.

I thank you, Chair.

Agenda : ‘Twelfth Session of the Ministerial Conference – Date & Venue – Statement by the Chairman’

1. Thank you Chair, for your Statement.
2. Deciding the date of the much delayed 12th Ministerial Conference remains a matter of urgent priority for the WTO Membership.
3. We thank Kazakhstan for their early decision to re-offer hosting of MC12 in June 2021 at Nur Sultan, despite the continued global uncertainty associated with the Covid19 pandemic. Since this is the only offer on the table, we suggest that the Membership seriously consider accepting this proposal, subject of course to global public health conditions being suitable for all delegations to participate in the meeting.
4. The certainty of dates for MC12 has the advantage of allowing us to work collectively towards implementing a work plan with appropriate markers and ambition for outcomes by then. An early decision on this issue will also help mute criticism that the WTO has not held a Ministerial Conference at a critical time when both trade and the rules based multilateral system have been under serious threat.
5. I thank you, Chair.

Agenda : ‘Process of Appointment of the Next Director-General - Statement by the Chairman’

1. Thank you, Chair, for your Statement.
2. At the outset, I take this opportunity to place on record our deep appreciation of the outgoing DG’s leadership of the WTO during the last 7 years. India shall always cherish his contribution.
3. Chair, we appreciate that you wasted no time in announcing the commencement of the selection process. We hope that throughout this process, you and the facilitators alike will strive to ensure that it remains a fully transparent and an inclusive process, in full conformity with the procedures outlined in the document WT/L/509. India will support your efforts towards that end.
4. We understand the need for completing the selection process as early as possible so that WTO is not devoid of leadership during this critical period. Therefore, we welcome your alacrity in consulting Members and India stands ready to work through the month of August to support the work of the WTO, including the DG selection process. We also hope, as you take this process forward, you would give due consideration to the requests and suggestions of developing and LDC members, as they look forward to actively participating in the new DG selection process.
5. I thank you, Chair.

Agenda : Joint Ministerial statement on action plans to facilitate the flow of goods and services as well as the essential movement of people.

1. Thanks Chair for the floor.
2. We thank the delegation of the Republic of Korea and other co-sponsors for their proposal. Our preliminary comments are as follows:
3. India supports the adoption of trade facilitation measures that are consistent with the WTO Trade Facilitation agreement, and in line with the existing balance of rights and obligations of Members under the WTO agreements.
4. We agree that emergency measures taken in the wake of the pandemic should be “targeted, proportionate, transparent, and temporary”. In a similar vein, we would like to reiterate that temporary reductions of customs duties on essential medical and agricultural products are well within the rights of a WTO Member. Therefore, we do not support permanent tariff liberalization as a response to a temporary crisis.
5. On the point regarding the ‘establishment of a consultation mechanism between the relevant authorities of the signatory countries to identify and address trade disruptions that affect the trade in essential goods’, we would appreciate greater clarity from the signatories of the statement on whether they envisage this to be a temporary, ad-hoc mechanism for the duration of the pandemic, or something more permanent.
6. ‘Essential’ cross-border travel during the time of a global pandemic must obviously include the cross-border movement of medical professionals. Members should establish multilateral guidelines to facilitate this. We are surprised to see that the signatories of the joint statement did not include this critical category of doctors and nurses in their recommendations on the essential movement of people, and recommend that they consider adding it to make the statement fit for purpose.

I thank you, Chair.
