

# Protesters, Police Clash at WTO Meeting

By Rajesh Mahapatra

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HONG KONG — Several dozen protesters struck security forces with bamboo sticks and tried to ram through a police roadblock Tuesday as the World Trade Organization meeting opened in Hong Kong. There were no immediate reports of injuries.

The confrontation occurred after several thousand protesters marched through the city against the WTO and globalization, which many of them believe benefit primarily the rich and powerful. Some of the protesters — mainly South Korean farmers — punched their fists in the air and beat drums and gongs, while others held signs saying "RIP WTO" and "World Threatening Organization."

Riot police with helmets and shields tried to fend off the protesters with pepper spray a few blocks away from the WTO meeting venue. The scuffle lasted about a half-hour and died down as police reinforcements arrived.

Earlier, dozens of South Korean farmers jumped into Victoria Harbor and tried to swim a few hundred yards along the coast to the WTO venue. Police intercepted them before they reached the venue.

Police have blocked off access to roads near the conference site and set up barricades in an effort to prevent violence that has flared at previous WTO summits.

Meanwhile, the WTO meeting opened with rich and poor nations still at odds over agriculture trade, the major sticking point that has held up world trade negotiations for months.

The deadlock threatens to undermine — or even derail — the six-day Hong Kong meeting, which was originally meant to lay the groundwork for a global treaty by the end of 2006 that would cut trade barriers across a wide array of sectors, from agriculture to services.

Developing nations accuse the United States, European Union and other rich countries of not cutting agricultural tariffs and farm subsidies enough, keeping out exports from poorer nations.

India's trade minister, who has emerged as a key figure in the talks, said that while it would be hard for 149 WTO members to reach an agreement on farm trade, he didn't foresee an outright collapse like at the previous WTO gathering in Cancun, Mexico, two years ago. Agriculture was the culprit there, too.

"The next six days are going to see efforts by everybody to move forward," Indian Commerce Minister Kamal Nath told the Associated Press. "But efforts do not necessarily mean there will be results, because the issues are very, very contentious."

"Developing countries do not want to see the perpetuation of inequities in global trade," he added.

EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson has said the EU won't change its offer of an average 46 percent cut in farm tariffs unless he sees some movement from developing nations on offering to reduce their trade barriers on manufactured goods and services.

The United States has proposed eliminating export subsidies for its farm products by 2010 and cutting domestic farm subsidies by 60 percent over the next five years. But developing nations remain unsatisfied.

With expectations so low, some delegates have been saying another gathering of all WTO members would be needed to hammer out the specific formulas that will form the basis for a final treaty.

"This meeting has already been downgraded as a midterm stocktaking," said Mari Pangestu, Indonesia's trade minister, who heads a grouping of 45 poorer countries within the WTO.

However, eager to show some positive progress, the EU and Japan have urged nations to embrace a proposal allowing free market access for products from the world's least developed countries \_ a move that could prevent an outright collapse of the talks but would put off dealing with more intractable issues.

Pangestu welcomed the move, but said "it should not become substitute for other development issues."