

Economies need care, Jamaica's prime minister says

Jamaica's prime minister said small Caribbean economies should be treated with more care than larger nations require.

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Miami Herald

December 8, 2004

Small nations generally have tiny economies vulnerable to natural disasters and "external shocks," so it's unfair they should live by trade rules that fit larger economies, Jamaica Prime Minister P.J. Patterson said Tuesday at a trade conference in Miami.

Patterson's remarks at the 28th annual Miami Conference on the Caribbean Basin were made in reference to the effort to unite the economies of 34 nations under the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

"As smaller economies we expect the FTAA process to engender fair trade rules that would take into full account our size and disparate strengths," said Patterson, a highly regarded leader in the Caribbean Community, or CARICOM. "This must then be translated into effective measures that would allow countries to fully take advantage of the opportunities created in order to increase our present levels of development. Unless this is a principal goal, the FTAA will not be to the advantage of the Caribbean Community."

Patterson is one of several heads of government from the Caribbean and Central America participating in the conference. More than 500 government, trade and business leaders from the United States and abroad are in Miami for the conference, which ends today.

Patterson's message was that the 34 nations involved in the FTAA negotiations, but particularly Caribbean nations, are "of different economic strengths and so we cannot be expected to bear the same weight or proceed at equal speed. . . . We are faced with the dilemma of participating in negotiations on the same terms as larger economies, despite our limitations in human and financial resources."

He said CARICOM is embarking on a single-market experiment to be implemented next year. The CARICOM Single Market and Economy will knock down trade barriers among 13 member states and allow the free flow of capital, workers and services.

"This bold initiative will see CARICOM territories united in a single economic space," Patterson said. "It will mark the apogee of the economic integration process in our region."

Earlier in the day, Charles Shapiro, the deputy assistant secretary of state at the U.S. State Department, publicly took CARICOM to task for its stance of not recognizing the interim government of Haiti. He said the United States remained fully committed to helping Haiti attain good government and that Haiti's neighbors needed to be fully onboard in that effort.