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At talks, a sense of urgency

Amid ongoing sparring, trade officials gather in Switzerland in the latest stab at salvaging global trade negotiations

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In a meeting that some are calling the last chance for top U.S. and European trade officials to put international trade talks back on track, envoys from poor, rich and in-between countries will descend on Geneva today to negotiate guidelines for a global pact.

European Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy and U.S. Trade Representative Robert B. Zoellick are expected to be among the 40 ministers scheduled to meet -- along with representatives of environmental, labor, consumer and business groups -- for at least five days of talks at the World Trade Organization in Geneva.

Going into the meeting, there was no prior agreement over how or even whether to go forward with the latest round of trade negotiations. The so-called Doha round has undergone a few advances but mostly reverses for five years.

The goal of this meeting is to reach agreement on a series of proposals to negotiate such issues as farm subsidies and agricultural tariffs, lowering tariffs on manufactured good and technology to facilitate trade.

But with delays on the draft texts, unresolved meetings with the world's poorest countries and even French President Jacques Chirac's rebuke of Lamy's endorsement of the draft agreement as contrary to EU interests, the minitrade ministerial may get off to an uncertain start.

This meeting represents the last chance for Lamy and Zoellick to salvage the global trade talks. Lamy's term as EU trade commissioner ends at the end of the year, while Zoellick's future may hang on whether President Bush wins reelection.

Zoellick said that the United States was committed to opening markets but that it wouldn't sign a draft "simply for the sake of a deal."

"We want to see an ambitious result and the opening of markets in agriculture, manufactured good and services," Richard Mills, a USTR spokesman, said in a telephone interview from Geneva. "We want a real trade round."

From the start, this round of negotiations has been marked by disagreement over whether new issues should be negotiated as industrialized countries would like or the international body should heed the complaints of poorer countries, which want rules hashed out in the last round of negotiations to be fixed before new issues are added.

"What is going on in Geneva is a continuation of that same debate, that disagreement," said Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch and co-author of Whose Trade Organization: The Comprehensive Guide to the WTO.

The image of African cotton farmers being pushed into poverty because of U.S. cotton subsidies is a dramatic symbol of the issues at stake in these talks, but countries and companies around the globe have a stake in their outcome. Corporations insist trade liberalization is needed to keep the forces of globalization rolling. Citizen groups have demanded more say in the closed-door negotiations, arguing that trade rules affect everything from food safety to access to low-cost pharmaceuticals.

Trade experts like former Florida Rep. James Bacchus have noted that there is little chance of thawing the deep freeze of the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas without reaching an agreement in the WTO.

As it was in the failed WTO talks in Cancun, Mexico, last September, agriculture is still the biggest stumbling block in Geneva. The latest concessions from the European Union and the United States to reduce domestic subsidies and export credits -- which, poor countries have charged, would lead to the dumping of low-cost food commodities into the world market -- has not been accepted by the poorer nations.

Those countries want to delay tariff reductions to protect Third World farmers -- who make up 99 percent of the world's agricultural workforce -- from subsidized commodity imports.

And they want such preferences spelled out in great detail.

"The Doha declaration gave the impression that there would be real progress in reducing export subsidies and domestic subsidies," said Martin Khor, an economist from the Third World Network based in Geneva.

An agreement to get the Doha round back on track cannot be finalized until all the countries have signed off on the full proposal, not just on some of its elements.