

USTR Kirk confident of trade pact progress this year

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WASHINGTON - The Obama administration's top trade official said on Monday "real progress" could be made in the long-stalled Doha round of world trade talks by the end of 2010.

Political changes will help spur momentum for the World Trade Organization talks, now in their ninth year, said Ron Kirk, who has insisted large developing countries like Brazil, China and India must do more to open their markets to U.S. farm and manufactured goods.

"I'm confident and hopeful that once we get past the elections in Brazil, now that we're through the elections in Japan, and others, that we will have enough momentum going into the end of the year to make some real progress," Kirk told reporters in Washington.

Japan's ruling party lost its majority in one of two houses of Parliament in July, and Brazil will hold presidential elections in October. Representatives of the world's largest developed and developing economies will meet in November in Korea for the G20, where trade will be on the agenda.

Kirk said the atmosphere around the talks was improving.

"There is less anxiety now over the notion that it is a desirable thing" to engage in world trade talks, Kirk said. "A year ago that was almost unanimously rejected."

The WTO talks, now in their ninth year, were designed to spur trade in developing countries. However, negotiations have floundered over how much rich countries like the United States and the European Union should cut their trade-distorting farm subsidies and tariffs in exchange for new market access from Brazil, India, China and other leading developing countries.

Kirk spoke on the sidelines of an annual forum on U.S. trade with Africa. AGOA, or the African Growth and Opportunity Act, is a U.S. trade program that allows countries in sub-Saharan Africa to export over 6,400 varieties of goods to the United States without paying duties.

Kirk said the AGOA will likely be renewed by Congress before its 2015 expiration, though it is unlikely to be made permanent. African trade groups have said the program's temporary nature discourages long-term investment in the continent.

Kirk promoted completion of the Doha round as the best way to increase African trade.

"If we can get Doha done right, with an ambitious and balanced outcome that encompasses more than just agriculture, I think many of the sub-Saharan African countries could marvelously benefit from that," he said.