

Brazil official's Nazi reference rocks WTO talks

By Bradley S. Klapper
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Some pre-negotiation jabbing turned into a potentially damaging diplomatic incident Saturday when Brazil's foreign minister said rich countries' deception in trade talks reminded him of tactics used by Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels.

His comments drew a sharp rebuke from the United States, whose chief trade negotiator, Susan Schwab, is the daughter of Jewish Holocaust survivors. Her spokesman described the reference to Goebbels as "incredibly wrong."

The controversy threatens to overshadow next week's last-ditch effort to save seven years of frustrating talks on a new global trade pact toward alleviating poverty around the world.

The so-called Doha trade round is already teetering on the brink of collapse. President Bush has made a Doha deal a key part of his trade agenda.

Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said the U.S., Europe and other wealthy economies have so frequently misrepresented the talks launched in Qatar's capital in 2001 that public perception has become totally warped.

"Goebbels used to say if you repeat a lie several times it becomes a truth," Amorim told reporters at the World Trade Organization, where top negotiators from over two dozen countries are expected Monday for the official start of the talks.

Poorer countries have demanded cuts in the farm tariffs and subsidies used by wealthy countries, saying they hinder Third World development. In exchange, rich countries have insisted on better market access in developing countries for their manufacturers and service providers.

Amorim implied that rich countries were employing Goebbels' lying tactics in describing the agricultural concessions they claim they are willing to make, while criticizing poorer countries for refusing to liberalize their industrial markets.

"I am reminded of Goebbels," said Amorim, whose country has co-led with India a broad coalition of developing countries at the WTO talks.

Later, his spokesman qualified the remarks and apologized to Schwab.

Sean Spicer, spokesman for the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, said he was horrified by the "personal venom" of Amorim's words.

"We came here to Geneva to negotiate on substance," Spicer told The Associated Press. "For him to make remarks like this is so incredibly wrong. They are insulting."

Spicer noted that Schwab visited Amorim to soothe tensions immediately after negotiations collapsed in acrimony in 2006.

In an interview with the AP, Amorim's spokesman Ricardo Neiva Tavares said the minister "regrets if Susan Schwab or anyone else was upset by his comments on a historical fact. He certainly did not intend to hurt anyone's feelings, which he deeply respects."

Associated Press writer Eliane Engeler contributed to this report.