

Key players ready to try again for WTO deal - Lamy

By Laura MacInnis
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GENEVA, Sept 11 (Reuters) - Major economies are ready for another shot at the Doha Round negotiations to clinch an accord on freeing up global commerce, World Trade Organization (WTO) chief Pascal Lamy said on Thursday.

"My sense today is that there is scope for renewed engagement over the coming weeks, as confirmed by the technical discussions that have been held here in Geneva these past two days," he told lawmakers at an Inter-Parliamentary Union summit.

Trade officials from the United States, European Union, India, Brazil, China, Japan and Australia met to discuss next steps for the WTO accord on Tuesday and Wednesday, and are due to meet again next week.

Ministers from those seven economies locked horns in July over the workings of an emergency tool to shield poor farmers during import surges or price drops, with India pressing hard for more protection.

That technical dispute sank Lamy's effort to hash together a basic deal covering trade in farming and industrial goods, and raised questions about whether the WTO's 153 member governments were ready to finally clinch the Doha Round.

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Lamy said his "telephone diplomacy" and visits to capitals since the talks collapsed in July had convinced him there was life left in the Doha global accord, whose negotiations began seven years ago.

"Key players told me they were ready to give it another try," the Frenchman said. While it is now impossible to wrap up the full Doha accord in 2008, negotiators should still be able to find consensus in the key areas of agriculture and industrial goods in the coming months, according to the director-general.

"If we cannot complete the Doha Round by the end of the year, let's at least aim to complete these modalities that would take us 80 to 90 percent of the way in 2008 so as to conclude the Round in 2009," he said.

Lamy had been pressing for a breakthrough in July to wrap up the politically sensitive WTO talks before the U.S. election in November that will put a new administration in the White House, and possibly change Washington's negotiating stance.

But if WTO members overcome their disagreements over the agricultural "special safeguards mechanism," there may be an appetite to resume the broader talks that also cover services and trade assistance for poorer countries.

Economists believe a Doha Round deal could inject billions of dollars into the global economy and make it easier for poor-country farmers and manufacturers to sell their wares abroad, potentially creating jobs and raising incomes.

Before the multilateral talks can resume in full, the WTO will need to select a new chair for the negotiating group on industrial goods, following the departure of Canadian ambassador Don Stephenson who has returned to Ottawa.

That selection is expected to be finalized by the next meeting of the General Council in October. (Editing by Mark Trevelyan)