

Trade ministers head for fresh Doha talks

By Adam Plowright

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NEW DELHI — World trade ministers meet in the Indian capital this week for a fresh round of talks aimed at building momentum to conclude the long-stalled Doha Round of global free-trade talks.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations began in 2001 with the aim of boosting global commerce to help developing countries, but deadlock between the major trading blocs has dashed repeated attempts to forge a new pact.

The last push in July last year in Geneva ended in failure, but with new governments installed in Washington and the host nation India, there is renewed hope for another drive for success sometime next year.

India's new trade negotiator, Commerce Minister Anand Sharma, has said he wants a deal, but his ministry sought to manage expectations last week about the outcome of the meeting in New Delhi on September 3-4.

"This is not going to be a negotiating forum," Commerce Secretary Rahul Khullar, the top civil servant in India's commerce ministry, told reporters last Tuesday.

"We are looking for a commitment to re-engage on Doha."

This reflects the amount of consensus-building that has to be done, with sharp differences remaining between rich and poor nations on outstanding issues such as farm subsidies and tariffs on industrial products.

"If I try to talk on content issues, it will kill the conference," Khullar said.

At WTO headquarters in Geneva, the mood has nevertheless improved since last year's collapse, buoyed by the vocal support for the Doha talks offered by world leaders at recent Group of 20 (G20) meetings.

"We must finish next year," WTO chief Pascal Lamy said earlier in the year. "Technically, that is feasible. Politically, things have taken a turn for the better."

The WTO talks involve the 153 nations of the world trade body who must all agree to a pact that would radically reduce the value of subsidies given to farmers while reducing tariffs and other trade barriers.

Much will depend on the attitude in Washington, experts agree.

US President Barack Obama has joined other world leaders in calling for a successful conclusion of the Doha talks, but analysts say he faces pressure from domestic industry groups who are likely to seek protection.

Since his came to office in January, Obama has avoided any showdown with labour groups who have wide influence in his Democratic party and who are generally sceptical about free-trade agreements.

"Obama must act soon to resolve the tensions between global leadership aspirations and rising economic nationalism at home," said Claude Barfield, a former consultant to the office of the US Trade Representative and now with the conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington.

Obama's top trade envoy Ron Kirk has said that Washington is committed to outlining a new basis for negotiations over the stalled Doha talks by this month.

"While we should not discard the progress made to date in the Doha round, we must consider new ideas to get these talks moving again," US Trade Representative Kirk said recently.

"It will take some creativity, and quiet and informal work by ministers and by senior officials," he said.

Kirk is expected in Delhi alongside 30 leading counterparts from the major trading blocs, including the European Union's Catherine Ashton, Brazil's Celso Amorim, Australia's Simon Crean and South Africa's Rob Davies.