

Ministers look to US during WTO meet

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GENEVA — Over a hundred ministers gathered Monday for a World Trade Organisation conference, with pressure growing on the United States to boost negotiations for a global trade pact.

Amid violent demonstrations outside the conference centre, developing countries have called for urgent action on the Doha Round of talks on trade liberalisation, which have foundered since they were launched in 2001.

World leaders have set a new 2010 target to conclude the Doha process, even though several deadlines have been missed.

"The best way of strengthening the system is concluding this round, this is what I expect to hear here from a vast majority if there's not a total consensus," WTO chief Pascal Lamy told a trade symposium on the sidelines of the ministerial meeting, underscoring differences in Geneva.

The United States will be in the spotlight as some developing countries say it holds the key for pushing the talks forward.

In an apparent reference to the world's largest economy, Brazil's Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said "one country ... is stopping us from moving forward."

Another Latin American diplomat said: "We clearly lack an explicit position from one of the most important members of the negotiations. We are of course talking about the United States."

He added that the WTO ministerial meeting "should pressure" President Barack Obama's administration to make a deeper engagement on trade.

Dogged by domestic problems such as health care and the war in Afghanistan as well as a Democratic-led Congress largely hostile to trade liberalisation, the United States has not put concrete reforms on the table, analysts say.

Reflecting the Doha stalemate, the WTO's 153 member-states decided that negotiations are not officially on the agenda at the first gathering of its top decision-making body in four years, unlike previous ministerials when offers and counter-offers were made.

Ministers from the Cairns Group of 19 agricultural exporting countries said they were dismayed by the lack of progress in ending the Doha stalemate.

"We are disappointed with the limited progress in resolving or narrowing differences on the outstanding agriculture modalities," the ministers said in a statement, after a meeting on the sidelines of the WTO conference.

Modalities refer to broad formulas or approaches for tariff cuts, under the the Doha talks.

"We have a strong message -- conclude the Doha Round in 2010," Australian Trade Minister Simon Crean said after chairing discussions of the Cairns Group, which account for more than 25 percent of the world's agricultural exports.

More than 100 developing countries also called Sunday for an "urgent" conclusion of WTO negotiations.

The call first came from the Group of 20, a coalition of countries led by India and Brazil pushing for a reduction of trade-distorting farm subsidies and for greater access to industrialised markets.

It was endorsed by other groups representing African, Caribbean and Pacific countries as well as least developed states.

Ministers at the three-day WTO talks are expected to stress their commitment to completing the round, even though such pledges have been made over the years and deadlines repeatedly missed.

While Swiss police fired tear gas and rubber bullets on Saturday at hooded protesters who broke windows and set cars alight during an anti-globalisation demonstration, there was no fresh violence on Monday, even though some campaigners holding placards stood outside the conference centre.