

Russian Dep PM sees WTO talks progress

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RIGA - Russia expects progress over the next couple of months in talks to enter the World Trade Organisation, even though Georgia has blocked its accession bid, First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov said on Wednesday.

"We are doing everything we can to complete all the negotiations in the forthcoming weeks, and my colleagues are completing bilaterals (trade agreements), like with Saudi Arabia yesterday," Shuvalov told Reuters.

"If everything goes well maybe by the end of the summer we will complete all the issues and then it will be up to the decision of the (WTO) working group," he added, speaking on the sidelines of a meeting of Baltic Sea state leaders.

Russia is by far the biggest country still outside the 152-member WTO, which umpires the world trading system.

Membership would put Russia on an equal footing with other trading powers, including the United States, which would then need to lift Cold War-era trade provisions tying economic relations to emigration rights for religious minorities.

Former Soviet Georgia has since last month blocked Russia's 15-year-old bid to join the group because of Moscow's ties with two breakaway Georgian regions.

"All the issues they raise are political ones, not related to trade issues," Shuvalov said, when asked whether he thought Georgia would drop its veto.

"They can raise them, but then it's a political discussion ... We are optimistic, we will negotiate, we will try to be positive, if not, that will be their decision," he said.

Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, also attending the Baltic meeting, said Russian WTO entry was important for the whole region, leading to fully liberated trade. "I don't know when it (Russia) is ready (to join the WTO) because that is in the hands of others, but for us, for the region and Russia itself, as soon as possible would be a good thing," Reinfeldt told Reuters.

(Reporting by Nerijus Adomaitis and Jorgen Johansson, writing by Patrick Lannin)