

Farmers groups from EU, Japan, Canada voice concern about trade talks

Agence France Presse

26 July 2004

Farmers groups from the European Union, Japan and Canada said Monday they were very worried about the way talks on bringing down global trade barriers were heading.

Representatives of a coalition of farmers federations said after a meeting with World Trade Organisation chief negotiator Shotaro Oshima that their concerns focused on the drive for market access by bringing down tariffs.

"We told him we were not opposed to the progress of the negotiations, but certainly not with the text on agriculture," Jean-Michel Lemetayer, vice-president of the Committee of Agricultural Organisations in the European Union said afterwards.

Lemetayer told journalists that each country must be able to ensure that farming focuses on its domestic market as a priority.

"The ground that we cultivate cannot be delocalised," he said.

The draft compromise text Oshima released to the WTO members states on July 16 calls for the elimination of export subsidies on agriculture and cuts in import tariffs.

The 147 member states are due to meet at a ruling WTO General Council meeting from Tuesday to try to reach an agreement by the end of the week on new guidelines that would galvanise troubled global trade talks.

In a letter to Oshima, Lemetayer's group, Japan's Ja Zenchu and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture said they were "particularly worried by the development of discussions on market access".

They said there was a need for "sufficient flexibility" to allow farmers "to meet society's food security and rural concerns for sensitive products".

"Similarly, it must be ensured that the competitive position of farmers who incur high costs in order to meet society's concerns about food safety, the environment and animal welfare is not undermined by imports which do not meet the same standards," the letter added.

The groups noted that there had been "no progress" at the WTO on how to address non-trade concerns.

European Union ministers meeting in Brussels on Monday called for a better balance in several key points of the WTO draft compromise.

Lemetayer, who also heads the main French Farmers Union (FNSEA) said he hoped the EU would draw up a relatively broad list of sensitive products that could benefit from smaller import tariff cuts, thereby retaining some protection.

"At world prices, there are few European farmers who would be able to resist," he said, adding that EU Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy had made a big concession by putting all export subsidies on the negotiating table at the WTO.

Lemetayer argued that Oshima's proposal offered little in return to the EU. Provisions for concessions on export credits, which would come mainly from the United States, were relatively weak, he added.

Meanwhile, pressure groups defending poor countries slammed the WTO's draft framework Monday, saying it was biased in favour of wealthy trading superpowers like the EU and United States.

"Rich countries must get their heads out of the sand and fulfil their promises. They have been blocking progress towards reform of global trade and they alone have the power to unlock the round" said Celine Charveriat, Head of Oxfam International's Geneva Office.

The British-based group Action Aid accused rich countries in a statement of "continuing to bribe, bully and threaten developing countries".

Focus on Global South argued in a report that no progress had been made on proposals to further break down barriers on non agricultural products, which developing countries had already rejected last year, while only "lip service" had been paid to other poor country fears, it added.

"There is only one thing that developing country governments can do with the proposed July framework: dump it," the third world support group added.