

Time is GMT + 8 hours
Posted: 30 July 2004 0412 hrs

WTO accused of lack of transparency, pressuring poor members

GENEVA : Several developing countries and advocacy groups criticised a "lack of transparency" in crunch talks at the World Trade Organisation, arguing that richer nations were trampling on their interests.

"The negotiations at the World Trade Organisation are not an open process," said Love Mtesa, Zambia's ambassador to the global trading club.

"There is a lack of transparency which must be reformed to make the process more open for everyone," he said on the sidelines of a press conference by a group of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Geneva.

On the third day of talks to revive the so-called Doha round of free trade negotiations that were launched in 2001, many of the WTO's 147 members appeared frustrated at the slow progress, in part due to private debates between core members the United States, the European Union, Brazil, India and Australia.

"It is catastrophic," declared Switzerland's chief trade negotiator Luzius Wasescha.

"The price will be paid this evening," he warned, referring to an imminent reaction to a draft proposal being drawn up that aims to create a consensus to salvage global trade talks by a Friday night deadline.

A European official responded: "Whether trying to advance the negotiations or doing nothing, the EU is criticised."

Poor countries -- into whose markets the European Union and the United States demand greater access in exchange for concessions on trade-distorting export subsidies and domestic support -- are the biggest critics.

"They have given us 24 hours to negotiate a text," said Mtesa, referring to the draft proposal that is due out perhaps by midnight.

"We do not have the time to consult with our capitals," he complained.

Many developing countries also suspect the WTO -- under pressure from rich powers -- of favourising a process that forces them to agree hastily to a proposal without taking into consideration the ramifications.

"They want us to sign the same formula on industrial tariffs that was proposed and rejected almost one year ago at the conference in Cancun," said Mtesa, talking about an infamous meeting in September that collapsed amid deep divisions between rich and poor countries.

Such criticism, muttered by developing countries in the corridors of the WTO's headquarters in Geneva over the past few days, were echoed by non-governmental organisations, who frequently denounce what they see as unfair pressure exerted on the developing world.

"The situation is really dangerous for developing countries on agriculture and industrial goods," said Aileen Kwa of Focus on the South.

"We all know the consequences of the WTO agreements for populations in poor countries, not prepared for global competition," she said.

Aftab Alam Khan, from the advocacy group Action Aid, alleged that: "Some countries have been told by Japan to accept WTO deals against food aid."

Quizzed on the accusations, a spokesman for the US delegation to the WTO said: "We've travelled a lot and met a lot of ministers. WTO negotiations are the best way to trigger development in poor countries"

- AFP