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WTO aiming for mini-ministerial in 2005

GENEVA - World Trade Organisation chief Supachai Panitchpakdi said Monday that he wanted to hold an informal meeting of trade ministers on the fringe of the World Economic Forum in Switzerland in January.

The "brainstorming session" could be the first of a series of mini-ministerials in 2005 as the WTO's 148 member states get back down to negotiations on the substance of the Doha round of liberalisation talks next year, Supachai indicated.

"On the fringe of Davos there will be a few ministers, we probably will have the possibility of an informal ministerial meeting, with something like 20 or 25 ministers," he told journalists.

"There are some countries that have indicated to me that they are interested in hosting some of these mini-ministerials, but we have to talk to the members first," Supachai added.

The WTO is due to hold a full, decision-making, ministerial meeting in Hong Kong in December 2005.

The Hong Kong conference, WTO officials hope, will confirm the broad outlines of the trade talks and could be a key stage in channelling the Doha round to completion.

Launched in the Qatari capital in November 2001, the round came close to collapse over disagreements between rich and poor countries at a ministerial gathering in Cancun, Mexico in September 2003. Supachai said there was a need to maintain a closer connection between the Geneva-based trade diplomats and their ministerial bosses back in capitals through the negotiations.

"I should not want members to go to Hong Kong with lots of loose ends to be tied," Supachai said.

"I do think that there is a need by spring next year, not later than March, that we can do stock-taking," he added.

The WTO chief emphasised that mini-ministerials were not meant to be for negotiations but an opportunity to update ministers on the state of play and swap ideas about future talks.

Some smaller countries have expressed fears about being sidelined from the trade talks by such meetings.

AFP