

August 01 2004 at 03:57PM  
Agence France Presse

## Promises, promises at WTO talks

By Emmanuel Duparcq

Geneva - West African countries left here on Sunday with the promise that their struggle against US cotton subsidies will be taken into account by the WTO but with no concrete guarantees that their struggling workers face a rosier long-term future.

Four poverty-stricken countries in the region - Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad - first presented their case in April 2003, and since then their campaign has become emblematic for the World Trade Organisation, called on to resolve a classic case of trade inequality which it was created to eradicate.

All four countries produce cheap, high-quality cotton, often using traditional methods, but are unable to compete against subsidised competition from the mighty United States.

Against this backdrop, the agreement squeezed out after 20 hours of gruelling negotiations between the Africans and Americans in Geneva this weekend can be viewed in two ways.

The WTO and African delegates see the accord from a political and upbeat standpoint, welcoming it as the "first step" towards an actual reduction in US subsidies.

But an analysis of the facts shows that there is nothing concrete in it in terms of dates or figures, and that it is entirely dependent on the goodwill of the Americans.

"This will change absolutely nothing for rural Africans who are sinking into poverty," said development aid charity Oxfam International.

But did Africans have a choice, one year after being accused by industrialised countries of sabotaging the last WTO meeting in the Mexican resort of Cancun, thereby putting in danger the Doha round of trade talks launched in 2001 which in theory were given over to the development of poor countries?

When they arrived in Geneva, the Africans had threatened "in the name of the survival" of their people to block the WTO if their specific demands - an agreement on reductions in subsidies and a date for their elimination in 2005 - were not met.

After the dust settled they did not have much to show for their efforts. According to the agreement the question will be addressed "ambitiously, expeditiously, and specifically within the agriculture negotiations," a "cotton sub-committee" will be created and new international aid programmes will be given priority.

"We hope this agreement will be applied in good faith," said Moussa Nedie, a member of the Burkina Faso delegation in Geneva, adding: "We know there are limits beyond which we cannot

go."

Many observers here said the looming US presidential elections ruled out from the start any major US concession on cotton.

Senegalese Trade Minister Ousmane Ngom went as far as to make the startling observation that despite the urgency "Africans do not wish to smother American cotton producers," despite the fact that they gobble up \$3,9-billion in subsidies from Washington each year.

The accommodating tone from African cotton producers, some of whom have been invited to Washington by US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, is surprising bearing in mind the context.

"We don't really have a choice. African countries come under a lot of pressure both from industrialised countries and their own governments not to jeopardize food aid or bilateral agreements," said one African Union representative, on condition of anonymity.

"The Americans got their check books out," a European observer said, a reference to the "new development programmes" included in the agreement.

Both Africans and Americans have denied there has been any pressure.

Today there is nothing to prevent the US from maintaining its cotton subsidies for the next several years. However, they may be forced to reduce them in the end.

The WTO's dispute settlement body ruled last month that US subsidies to cotton farmers violated world trade rules after a case brought by Brazil.