Doha Round Stuck On Issues of Development (again)

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GENEVA - African negotiators are concerned that their development concerns have been sidelined in the much vaunted Doha Development Round of negotiations at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Whether the round, which has missed two previous deadlines, will be concluded this year or not depends on several issues.

All of these are about the power tussle between rich and poor countries over countries' prerogative to use national policies to safeguard development.

On the process of the negotiations, African delegations are fearful that they might be completely marginalized from what could possibly be the closing phase of negotiations this year.

Referring to the WTO General Council session on December 18, an East African negotiator remarked, "in every other developing country statement, the message to (WTO Director General) Pascal Lamy was that he should not take the revised texts from the chairpersons (of the negotiations) straight to the Green Room." The Green Room refers to closed door negotiations held among a limited number of delegations.

There are also concerns regarding the issue of rural livelihoods. Import surges, as a result of liberalization, have wrecked havoc and destroyed thousands of farm jobs across the developing world. G33 countries have specifically asked for a mechanism, the special safeguard mechanism (SSM), which would allow developing country members to raise their tariffs in response to these surges.

The G33 is a group of developing countries organised around the issue of rural livelihoods and food security.

An African G33 negotiator told IPS, "we are completely stuck on the SSM. There is no agreement on a whole range of issues".

On product coverage, proponents want all agricultural products to be covered by the mechanism, but exporting members want to limit the SSM to a much smaller number of products. On how the SSM can be triggered, proponents have been told that a much higher import volume is needed before they can avail of the SSM.

On the remedy, G33 members want to be able to go beyond the Uruguay Round bound tariff rate, but are also facing opposition there. This rate refers to the maximum tariff rate that countries can charge on imports, rates which they legally bound themselves to in the Uruguay Round of negotiations which were concluded in 1994.

The G33 negotiator added, "the chairperson (of the agriculture negotiations) also wants us to check whether or not consumers are benefiting from lower prices. If they are, the SSM should not be triggered. He also wants to limit the number of times the SSM can be invoked."

"There are layers and layers of restrictions being introduced in the SSM negotiations. At the end of the day, the mechanism will not be effective. These discussions are going the wrong way," is his conclusion.

Regarding the NAMA negotiations, South Africa's representative Faizel Ismail made a statement on behalf of the NAMA 11 at the last meeting of the General Council last year. The statement was aimed at averting another draft text that disregards their position. The NAMA 11 is a coalition of 10 developing countries.

He told the WTO membership on December 18 that "the NAMA chair's July text excluded the views of NAMA 11 completely. The revised text must redress this and expand the range of coefficients to include our position.

"Excluding our views again will prejudice the negotiating position of NAMA 11 developing countries and skew the negotiations in favour of developed countries once again. This will not result in a fair process, nor facilitate balanced outcomes in the negotiations."

Coefficients refer to the numbers to be negotiated for insertion into the tariff cutting formula. The higher the coefficient, the smaller the tariff cut a country has to make.

Yet another area of deep contention is in services liberalization. Here the demandeurs are mainly the U.S. and the EU, as well as India. Both the U.S. and the EU want to speed up the liberalization of services trade through "benchmarking" -- adoption of a formula that would obligate members to liberalise a certain portion of their services trade.

The Africa Group and the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries are completely opposed to this.

Even in the trade facilitation negotiations, a West African negotiator remarked, "we are not seeing the developed countries deliver on the commitments they undertook to provide technical assistance and capacity building to enable developing countries to implement obligations in trade facilitation".