

# Poor Countries Race to Make Their Voice Heard At WTO

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A decision over the next head of the World Trade Organisation may see developed countries pitted against the developing world.

The official move to find the new head of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) opened Dec. 1. The current head, Supachai Panitchpakdi of Thailand, is due to stand down Aug. 30 next year.

Pascal Lamy, the European Union (EU) nomination for the post of director-general at the Geneva-based trade body, added his name to the list this week after winning endorsement from the EU's 25 member states and the European Commission, the EU executive.

Lamy, a 57-year-old Frenchman, is the only candidate from the 'developed world' and joins candidates from the developing world vying for the top post.

Lamy, a French socialist, is likely to be the most high-profile nominee for the job but he may find it hard to win support from developing countries who are becoming increasingly assertive in the organisation.

Carlos Perez del Castillo, adviser to the Uruguayan president and a former ambassador to the WTO, has expressed at interest in job. Luiz Felipe de Seixas Correa, Brazil's ambassador to the trade body, was due to file his candidature Friday (Dec. 10).

Mauritian foreign affairs minister Jaya Cuttaree and Kenyan trade and industry minister Mukhisa Kituyi have also expressed interest in the job. They could split the vote of African nations.

Such divisions are already becoming apparent as Mauritian officials dismissed Kituyi's interest in the job last week. Speaking at the end of an African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group of countries ministerial meeting in Brussels, officials said the group of 79 ACP states was "overwhelmingly" behind Cuttaree.

Such high-level interest from developing countries reflects their desire to raise their profile at the WTO.

The WTO was set up in 1995 after the Uruguay Round of negotiations, which brought about the biggest reform of the trading system.

Its main role is as a forum of trade negotiations among its 148 members. It also handles trade disputes and provides technical assistance and training to developing countries.

The organisation's current chief still has nine months to serve, but the WTO is keen to avoid another row over the appointment of the new director-general. Such disputes had arisen in 1999. They split developing and developed countries, and left the organisation without a chair for months.

A compromise deal saw New Zealander Mike Moore take office for three years and then Panitchpakdi take office for three years after him. That decision replaced a four- year term for either.

Poorer members of the WTO will have a large share of the influence in selecting the new chief. It will be the job of each of the candidates therefore to convince these poorer countries that he is the right man for the role.

For Lamy this may not be easy.

Many developing countries were critical of Lamy's trade policy during his five-year term as EU commissioner when he played a key role in rescuing the WTO's stalled Doha round of trade liberalisation talks.

The poorer WTO members, who are becoming increasingly influential within the trade organisation, say it would increase the organisation's legitimacy if their nominee were to replace the present chief.

Perez del Castillo said last month the top job should go to either a Latin American or an African. Correia was quoted in the Financial Times newspaper this week as saying that he was prepared to press for his candidacy "on the basis of being a developing country fully committed to the system and to encouraging the participation of developing countries in the WTO."

Lamy will also need to win the support of the ACP group of states which has close links to the EU.

The group's own candidate, Cuttaree, has been drumming up support within the ACP bloc.

A spokesperson for the ACP secretariat in Brussels was reluctant to comment about the nominations before they were formalised, but others from the developing world are urging poorer countries to fight their corner at the body.

James Shikwati, director of the Kenyan non-governmental organisation (NGO) Inter Region Economic Network (IREN) says that the appointment of a head from the developing world would make it easier to "expose the poor nations to negotiations strategies" and may put a brake on "Developed World Agenda that seems to dominate all WTO discussions."

"It will be the most strategic thing to get somebody from a developing country head the WTO," Shikwati told IPS. "That will be a sign of commitment of not only opening up the world for trade but an avenue to dispel fears that WTO is merely a wealthy nations club with poor countries acting as mere pawns."

But such influence may be limited, Shikwati says. "I still doubt it will upset the grip that the most powerful economic countries have on WTO," he said. "What developing countries need urgently is to learn the tricks of the game at the WTO."

Some observers say that whether the next WTO chief comes from the developing or developed world, he or she should have the development aspect of the current Doha round of trade negotiations at heart.

Shortly after announcing the EU's support for Lamy, the European Commission dismissed developing country concerns over the suitability of Lamy's candidature.

"What matters most is that the next director-general is committed and qualified for the job, where they come from is not relevant," Claude Véron-Réville, spokesperson for trade at the commission told IPS.

"The EU has given its full backing to Lamy because we believe that he is the best man for the job. He is extremely experienced and knows how to negotiate with all countries," she added.

This view is backed by the United States, which has great interest in who the next WTO chief will be.

"The key issue is that the next director general of the WTO should be a credible person in the eyes of both developing and developed countries," a U.S. official in Brussels told IPS.

"Of course developing countries have played a muscular role in the Doha round of talks and they will be keen to examine each of the candidates, and will be eager that they will be supportive of the development aspect of the current negotiations," he said. "But this doesn't mean that the candidate has to come from the developing world."

Nominations for the post can be sent to the chair of the general council of the WTO by Dec. 31. This will be followed by three months of campaigning by nominees before consideration begins Apr. 1.

Less popular candidates are expected to withdraw their names during the final two months, leaving the general council to establish consensus around only one candidate by Jun. 1.