

Political will to conclude Doha round secured - WTO

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MANILA -- There is enough political support from key developed and emerging countries to forge an agreement this year to conclude the Doha round of trade talks, World Trade Organisation (WTO) chief Pascal Lamy said on Wednesday.

WTO members are racing against time because without a major breakthrough in the talks this year, the trade round could be shelved until 2009, or possibly longer, with U.S. presidential polls coming up next year.

"Are things moving? Yes, they are. Are we there yet? No we are not there yet. Do we have the necessary political support? Yes," Lamy, in Manila for the second of three regional trade conferences which kicked off in Peru last week, told reporters.

"We know the direction. Developed countries have to do more than what they have proposed in terms of reducing farm subsidies and their agricultural tariffs," Lamy said.

"They have agreed to that. The only remaining question is how much are the ranges," he said.

Developing member countries of the WTO want global trade rules to be more development friendly, with bigger cuts in farm subsidies and import tariffs than rich countries are prepared to commit.

Developing countries also need to commit exactly how much they can lower duties on industrial imports.

A successful conclusion of the Doha round is "absolutely necessary" for developing countries in the region, particularly the smaller and weaker economies, said Haruhiko Kuroda, president of the Manila-based Asian Development Bank, which is hosting the regional forum.

Last year, Lamy stopped the much-stalled Doha round, named after the capital of Qatar where they were launched, after trade powers failed to break the impasse over farm and manufacturing protections.

Talks towards concluding the trade round were dealt another blow in June when the European Union, United States, Brazil and India failed to bridge their divergent positions over politically sensitive issues.

Lamy said negotiators in Geneva brief him twice daily on the progress of talks, including the most divisive issues related to industry and agricultural goods.

"If we want to conclude the round ... sometime next year -- I'm talking about the final, final package -- in order to do that, we probably need the skeleton of the final agreement, including agriculture and industrial tariffs by the end of the year," Lamy said.

"A deal is possible. There are more chances of a final convergence today than six months ago," he said. "Six months ago, the conventional wisdom was we will never get there without a miracle."