

Big powers bullying poor to get trade deal in WTO talks, critics say

By Robert Evans

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GENEVA – International aid and development groups on Monday accused the United States, the European Union and Japan of using bullying and threats to get poorer countries to agree to an unfair world trade pact.

World Trade Organisation (WTO) Director-General Supachai Panitchpakdi says if there is no trade deal this week, it could be years before talks resume.

"Bullying and arm-twisting is being widely used by the major powers to try to get developing countries to accept an agreement that is against their interests," said Alexandra Strickner of the U.S. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

British-based ActionAid International said poorer WTO members were facing "threats by the EU of losing their trade preferences, by the U.S. of being excluded from bilateral trade agreements, and by Japan of losing aid programmes."

At the focus of this week's talks – the latest stage of the troubled Doha Round negotiations launched in 2001 – is a blueprint drafted by WTO mediators that sets outlines, including on the central issue of farm trade, for a final accord.

But developing countries insist the draft ignores many of their basic concerns, while some richer nations – including Japan and Switzerland – say its provisions for lowering tariff barriers would hit farmers vital to their economies.

"The developing countries are sick and tired of having their interests sidelined in favour of the interests of rich countries and their corporate lobbies," ActionAid activist from Senegal Moussa Faye told a news conference.

And a new grouping, Agriculture Trade Initiative from the South (ATIS), said the trade majors were driving to split the developing countries by offering "inducements" to some to accept the general thrust of the current blueprint.

Many governments in the so-called South say the 1986-93 Uruguay Round, hailed by big powers as a boost to the global economy, has brought more poverty for their farmers and workers forced to compete with subsidised goods from the North.

"But what we have seen so far," said Aileen Kwa of the Focus on the Global South NGO, "is little more than an effort to ensure that the rich countries can go on dumping their produce, especially farm goods, in the developing world."