

Mission report

(WTO Trade Facilitation Negotiation Group, WTO Geneva, July 24/26, 2006)

Ray McDonagh

The meeting took place against the back drop of the informal decision to suspend the work of all Doha Development Agenda negotiating groups. The afternoon session of Monday 24 July was suspended to allow attendance at a WTO Heads of Delegation meeting. As the formal legal decision to suspend was not taken until later in the week the negotiations went ahead.

Main points of note:

- The WTO Negotiating Group endorsed the Chair's report to its supervising body, Trade Negotiations Committee (TN/TF/4); the report consisted of version 9 of the compilation of the paper contribution (TN/TF/W/43/Rev.9) and a simple explanatory note.
- WTO Members clearly indicated that Trade Facilitation is part of a single undertaking; accordingly, there is no prospect (at least in the short term) of progress on individual items such as Trade Facilitation.
- Several new submissions were presented. Document TN/TF/W/137, presented by Paraguay, sponsored by a large number of members from across a broad spectrum. This document sets out an implementation mechanism of TF commitments including key elements for technical assistance. The presentation gave rise to several mainly favourable reactions. Several clarifications were sought, including: there was a lack of clarity on the proposed notification system; need to establish basic obligations; process to consider status of capacity acquisition report; the proposal assumes that there will always be a response to a request for assistance, what if there is no response; the proposal as drafted places legally binding measures on international organizations, this is not possible in an agreement. Sponsors attempted to address the concerns. The general view was that the paper offered a way forward but needed greater clarity especially in the areas mentioned in the document. One WTO member presented a non paper on the same topic on behalf of the Core group. While there are differences in approach to document TN/TF/W/137 the overall thrust is similar. The Chair urged discussion between the two groups.
- A proposal in document TN/TF/W/141 on the establishment of a Committee on Trade Facilitation was given a first reading. The proposal received a cautious welcome but it was recognized there was a need for greater clarity on the relationship between such a committee and other bodies. Chair suggested that it would be looked again after Members had time to reflect.
- A presentation from Pakistan of the national experience on its new CARE IT system proved extremely interesting to Members. This is an excellent development by Customs (the contents are the same to those presented at WCO/IMSC and PTC this year).
- Documents TN/TF/W/134 on post-clearance audit, TN/TF/W/136 on separation of release from clearance, TN/TF/W/138 on Single Window, TN/TF/W/139 on Release time and TN/TF/W/140 on risk management, received general support but some minor reservations were expressed on each paper. It is likely that were there to be an agreement these topics would feature.
- The World Bank presented an update on the study of costs of implementation of trade facilitation. WCO input was acknowledged. Essentially, the message was that cost need not be great and that most of the proposals on the table are already being implemented to a large

extent by Customs in the surveyed countries. As the WTO members noted the suspension of the Doha Development Agenda across the Round as a whole, Trade Facilitation negotiations, as part of this agenda, are also suspended. No meeting calendar for the next meeting of the Trade Facilitation Negotiating Group was set while Chairperson encouraged WTO members to continue their efforts to work on this agenda in a practical manner.