

Brief on the WTO Negotiating Group meeting on Trade Facilitation
on 7 and 9 February 2005

Toni Matsudaira

The WTO held a Trade Facilitation Negotiating Group meeting at its premises on 7 and 9 February 2005. The Secretariat attended the meeting along with the Secretariats of IMF, OECD, UNCTAD and World Bank. There were over 200 delegates; some countries sent 6 delegates or more, including Customs officer.

Nine proposals were introduced by the proponents, which were mainly on GATT Article X (transparency; impartiality; and appeals): EC (publication and availability of information, prior consultation, appeal procedures and due process); Korea (publication of information, notification & prior commenting period, interval between publication and implementation, single national focal point); Japan, Mongolia and Chinese Taipei (transparency, predictability, impartiality); Australia and Canada (advance ruling); Chinese Taipei (pre-arrival clearance, risk management & post-clearance audit, clearance for express consignments, advance ruling, one-stop information centre); and US (advance binding rulings, internet publication, fees, express shipment).

It was followed by the comments and Q&As on these proposals. Some delegations asked clarification on the words used in the proposals and questioned the linkage between the proposed issues and the negotiation mandates. In addition, many developing countries stressed the importance of S&D, implementation capacity linked to the commitments, and support to the capacity building.

Then, the observer intergovernmental organizations took floor. The Secretariat introduced WCO Information Note (compilation of the WCO papers in the past; describing how the requirements of the 3 GATT Articles are, in the context of Customs, dealt with in the WCO instruments) and Self Assessment Checklists (extracts from the Customs Diagnostic Framework; snapshot of customs in relation to GATT Articles V, VIII, X). The two papers were circulated amongst the WTO delegations at the meeting. The WTO negotiating group agreed that the WCO Self Assessment Checklists would be given the WTO Document status (TN/TF/W/16).

The World Bank made an oral presentation on its new project of supporting WTO Trade Facilitation negotiations in joint efforts of the WCO. The project is consisted of the following elements: establishment of appropriate national framework where all the stakeholders gather, including, in particular, Trade Negotiating Ministry and Customs; they would identify trade facilitation needs and priorities by using the tools developed by the WCO and, where appropriate, other organizations; and they would assess difficulties, costs and benefits of trade facilitation measures. The first pilot project would start in April.

Finally, the WTO negotiating group agreed that next meeting would be held on 22-24 March to which the WCO was invited.

Several gatherings were held at this occasion in Geneva. The World Bank organized a seminar on its publication "Customs Modernization Handbook" on 8 February. APEC held its round table discussions on 10 February. The Secretariat actively participated in these gatherings.