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BENIN

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I should like to thank and congratulate the authorities of Qatar and the City of Doha for giving the WTO the opportunity to hold its Fourth Ministerial Conference. My thanks and congratulations also go to Mr Mike Moore, Director-General of the WTO. Indeed, I regard my presence and that of other so-called least-developed countries at this meeting as one of the major outcomes of the new vitality you have injected into this Organization by promoting greater involvement of these countries in the multilateral trading system. This is an achievement for which I thank and congratulate you and, through you, not only the members of your team but also all the governments whose contributions and political will have made it possible to organize these proceedings. I also congratulate the countries that have recently acceded to the Organization, and in particular the People's Republic of China, with which Benin maintains excellent relations.

On behalf of my country's delegation, I observe that the multilateral trading system has made significant strides in recent years. We should, however, look beyond any legitimate satisfaction that might be derived from these encouraging developments and acknowledge – since this is no secret – that many Members of our Organization find themselves powerless, swallowing their frustration at a situation imposed in the name of political correctness, with the continuously dashed hope that their partners will finally understand their predicament and listen to reason.

Today, there are many of us in the least-developed countries, the ACP and other countries who share that feeling.

It is common knowledge that feelings of powerlessness and injustice are hardly conducive to active participation or a constructive attitude. This is why I should like to encourage our dear friends in the European Communities and the United States of America in particular to become more closely involved in the democratization of relations among the WTO Members.

Inequality precludes negotiation. Most countries will view negotiations in the WTO as a fool's game if the concerns of least-developed, ACP and other countries are simply ignored or politely acknowledged by means of a few hollow commitments. The main task of our Organization is to serve as a forum for negotiations among its Members – the weakest as well as the most powerful – to contribute to and oversee the strengthening of trade disciplines, to monitor compliance with the rules and statutory obligations, and to ensure fair trade.

This Fourth Conference provides a unique opportunity to assess our weaknesses, to define the major obstacles hampering our economies, and particularly those of the least-developed countries in their efforts to promote liberalization and growth. Our Conference will have to make it clear that this task cannot be successfully accomplished as long as the development concerns of developing countries are not taken seriously and duly addressed.

The paradox for us developing countries is that our domestic regulations, which provide for full and unrestricted liberalization, based on the rule of law and our strict adherence to the WTO contractual obligations, nonetheless do not allow us to benefit from the opportunities offered by this approach.

For countries such as Benin and many other developing countries that are doing their utmost – with the ardent faith of the newly converted and under the aegis of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank – to dismantle all that appears to them to constitute trade barriers, obstacles and constraints, the question is why the United States of America and the European Communities, for example, are maintaining their domestic barriers and are not only continuing to subsidize their agricultural exports but are also, and exponentially, granting subsidies for their domestic production.

We must have the courage to assess the cost of the impact of their domestic policies on our countries, our economies and our populations. And everyone will then understand the feelings of powerlessness and frustration experienced by many of the Organization's Members.

The WTO must go further still. While the developing countries must try and understand the domestic constraints facing the developed countries, these in turn must realize that there are choices to be made between domestic constraints dictated by the need to ensure the well-being of their citizens and the need for survival of the peoples of the South, and that the governments of developing countries are compelled to seek their help in selecting priorities. These are the terms in which we must address the issues pertaining to the Agreement on Agriculture, the Agreement on intellectual property rights and their relation to public health and nutritional problems, issues pertaining to trade and the environment, and implementation-related issues.

The challenge for countries such as ours lies first and foremost in framing laws, regulations and agreements in such a way that market access for our products can be attractive as well as effective. Today it is quite clear that market access conditions for products from least-developed countries are so stringent that they cannot but weaken, if not jeopardize, our trade, hence placing our production system in an ever more precarious and disturbing situation. I shall not dwell upon the difficulties faced by our human resources in making the adjustment needed both to find their way through the regulatory jungle and to attain the requisite management and performance levels.

I shall be quite frank in saying that there is no longer any doubt that the Members of the World Trade Organization are committed to a multilateral trading system, based on liberalized rules. From the developing countries' standpoint, if we are not careful we shall be building a market that will be no more than a fool's bargain, in which the inexorability of market forces will condemn a cotton producer from Mali or Benin to death, while the one from the United States of America will enjoy the inalienable right to life.

This Fourth Ministerial Conference provides us with the perfect opportunity to take stock of the strong points and weaknesses of the WTO, and especially to address the weaknesses, in order to strengthen the Organization and enable it to respond to the needs and concerns of its Members, including the various problems and obstacles encountered by developing economies and, in particular, the least-developed countries, in successfully integrating into the global economy.

Consequently, I would like to express my wholehearted and unconditional support for the Declaration by the Ministers responsible for trade matters from the ACP Group, submitted to this Conference, as well as for all the initiatives taken on the African continent. In addition to this, and to clarify certain matters, I am submitting for your consideration a series of proposals and suggestions for the negotiations to come on the following crucial issues:

- (a) The Agreement on Agriculture;

- (b) the Agreements on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT);
- (c) the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights;
- (d) the General Agreement on Trade in Services;
- (e) the issue of special and differential treatment; and
- (f) implementation issues.

Nevertheless, allow me at this juncture to highlight two or three aspects relating to the suggestions which I have submitted to you in detail.

1. The Agreement on Agriculture

For many of our developing countries, our economies and trade are largely based on agriculture or, indeed, a monoculture of speculation. Yet besides the poor economic and political management of which many of our governments, I regret to say, continue to be guilty, I must ask you to bear in mind that the more globalization gathers momentum, the more poverty and extreme poverty spread, so devastating and tragic is the impact for farmers in the least-developed countries of the policies pursued by the United States, Europe, or the newly industrialized countries, which maintain tariff peaks, tariff escalation, barriers of all kinds to prevent agricultural products from the least-developed countries from having access to the markets of developed countries, as well as domestic support, particularly so-called "Green Box" measures.

Meanwhile, if we are tempted to resort to export restrictions on raw materials, which are often justified by sensible domestic policies, we are regularly subjected to industrial intimidation.

2. The Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights

We strongly support the idea that the protection of local or traditional knowledge, including pharmacopoeia and medicine, should be clearly indicated in the Agreement. This provision could be a powerful tool for recovering, for the benefit of humanity, a priceless wealth of knowledge which today remains marginalized. Similarly, it would only be fair to grant farmers the same rights as those obtained by plant breeders.

In addition, relaxation of conditions for the exploitation of patents for essential medicines will lead to improved access to health care for many of the world's peoples, including those in developing countries and particularly least-developed countries, affected by the urgent problems of malaria, AIDS, tuberculosis and other diseases which have a disastrous impact on human life and economies.

3. Implementation issues

I would like to point out that several commitments made concerning least-developed countries have not been fulfilled. Consequently, I would like to see more substantial efforts to pursue and to improve technical assistance and capacity building through the Integrated Framework.

I would like to express my desire to see the waiver for the ACP/EC Cotonou Partnership Agreement granted by the end of this Conference. Autonomous initiatives such as the AGOA, taken by the United States of America in 2000, and the EBA (Everything But Arms), adopted by the European Union at the beginning of this year, are also market-opening measures that other developed countries should be encouraged to take.

The delegation of Benin firmly hopes that the results of this Ministerial Conference will see the continuation of efforts to improve the situation in poor countries. That is a reasonable, and therefore the only sustainable, basis for meeting the major challenges taken on by the WTO. My country, Benin, supports these challenges; they are our challenges, and we will work tirelessly to rise to them, in the interests of our and all the world's citizens.
