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PANAMA

Statement by H.E. Mr Joaquin E. Jácome Diez
Minister of Commerce and Industry

It is an honour for me today to address such a select gathering in order to put forward the position of the Government of the Republic of Panama with regard to this Fourth Ministerial Conference.

I thank His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Emir of Qatar, for all the splendid work that has gone into the organization of this Conference. I also thank the Director-General, Mr Mike Moore, for his strenuous efforts to ensure that the Conference is a success, and in particular for the visit he paid to the countries of Latin America, with the aim of charting a course different from the one tried out in Seattle.

On the occasion of that visit, Panama clearly expressed to the Director-General its concern with regard to the internal transparency of the Organization, special and differential treatment as an essential element of all WTO Agreements and specific aspects of topics such as agriculture, services, the Dispute Settlement Understanding, electronic commerce, and questions relating to the implementation of the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures.

However, the earth-shaking events of 11 September demonstrated once again that all our countries' economies are interconnected, and accentuated our desire to produce a Ministerial Declaration which contains all the elements needed to achieve the main objective of liberalization, i.e. reducing poverty levels and thereby improving the quality of life for our peoples.

For those of us who work for the State, those events call for unequivocal decisions to be taken on aspects of commercial, economic and social policy.

Panama recently completed four years of membership of the World Trade Organization. These four years have not been easy for a developing country like Panama which has had to fulfil all its obligations under the Agreements and the accession commitments without any period of transition to allow for a gradual adjustment within the parameters required by the multilateral trading system.

Nevertheless, the Government of Panama recognizes that trade liberalization is a legitimate instrument for strengthening the ideals of development and we welcome a new round of negotiations to deal with the needs of developing countries.

While it is clear that we must all play by the same rules, we must not forget that the level of development and the economic conditions of each country are different, hence the need to examine the concerns of each Member with a view to offering it the necessary tools to achieve prosperity.

If this Ministerial Conference is to be a success, we must commit ourselves to raising awareness that the developing and least-developed countries need more assistance from the developed countries which have succeeded in improving their citizens' quality of life.

These countries were able to help their production sectors to grow, over a long period of time, by means of mechanisms which, in one way or another, eased competition requirements.

Times have hardly changed, inasmuch as we in the developing and least-developed countries are those who today require aid for our comprehensive integration into the new era of globalization, on the basis of reason and pragmatism.

For reasons of justice and equity supported by figures that reflect the slow pace of growth in our countries, we propose that time-limits should be extended and that the existing terms and conditions of the Agreements and commitments should be made more flexible, as in the case of the time-limits for the elimination of export subsidies, which have helped to improve our conditions of development.

We support the reduction or elimination of the agricultural subsidies granted by the developed countries, tariff peaks for non-agricultural products and the liberalization of maritime transport services, tourism and financial services.

We consider it urgently necessary to effect improvements in the instrument which imparts credibility to the World Trade Organization, namely the Dispute Settlement Understanding, a mechanism which at times appears to reflect a lack of realism and effectiveness.

We would draw attention to the desire of some countries to elevate the Agreement on Government Procurement to multilateral status by means of an agreement on transparency in government procurement, since we believe that this would lead, directly or indirectly, to negotiations on market access in this field.

We welcome the initiative to pursue the electronic commerce work programme. Panama considers the moratorium in respect of electronic transmissions to be vitally important, since otherwise new trading opportunities and major economic benefits for our countries could be undermined.

With these brief remarks in mind, the Republic of Panama expresses its best wishes for the Ministerial Conference, which should conclude with a ministerial declaration that reinvigorates the WTO and provides hope for the developing and least-developed countries.
