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COLOMBIA

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Globalization, liberalization and the expansion of trade have generated new opportunities for the development of our peoples, for increased wealth and employment, and for the improvement of living standards. The multilateral trading system plays a fundamental role in this respect in that its rules provide Members with a guarantee of certainty and transparency in their trade activities. This is how Colombia has perceived the WTO, and in addition to its autonomous policy of liberalization introduced at the beginning of this decade, it has focused its efforts on ensuring the proper implementation of the multilateral agreements.

Free trade is not an end in itself, but a means of generating wealth and improving the standard of living of individuals. In other words, the role of trade is to contribute to progress and to narrowing the gap between the developed and the developing countries. In this respect it is important that the chief trading partners of the WTO take positive measures to ensure proper access to their markets for products of interest to the developing countries, avoiding the use of protectionist measures and using trade remedies in ways that are consistent with WTO rules and regulations, in particular the provisions granting special and differential treatment to exports from developing countries.

This approach should guide the discussions of this Ministerial Conference, whose main objective is to study and analyse the process of implementation of the different WTO Agreements. It is important to assess the way in which the Member countries have implemented the Agreements and fulfilled the commitments made and the objectives established. At the same time, we must not ignore the efforts made by the developing countries to implement the commitments adopted during the Uruguay Round and the difficulties they have encountered in doing so.

In the framework of this exercise, Colombia wishes to express concern at the poor implementation of the objectives of the Agreement on Textiles - indeed, the progressive liberalization and integration into the GATT system of the products subjected to restrictions has been very slow. Consequently, we urge the principal importing countries to show leadership and commitment to trade liberalization and non-discriminatory treatment by taking positive steps to ensure broad access to their markets for our textile products.

Another issue of special interest to Colombia is the dispute settlement system, which constitutes the cornerstone of regulated multilateralism and of the WTO. While it has functioned satisfactorily, a number of gaps and flaws have been detected which should be studied in the context of the planned review of the Dispute Settlement Understanding. We must find ways to strengthen its objectivity, fairness and transparency; and it is equally important to develop mechanisms to make it easier for the developing

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countries to participate effectively in the various dispute settlement mechanisms provided for in the WTO Agreement.

In analysing the multilateral trading system, we must not lose sight of the contribution of regional integration agreements. Colombia is convinced of the benefits of pursuing a policy of integration within the framework of open regionalism consistent with the WTO disciplines, and has participated actively in the modernization of the institutions of the Andean Community, whose integrationist vocation in the American hemisphere has a strong liberalizing effect.

Colombia recognizes the responsibility of governments to adopt domestic policies which enable them to take advantage of the benefits of the multilateral trading system, and to create the necessary conditions for the development of private initiative. Thus, since the beginning of this decade it has been promoting a policy of internationalization of its economy backed by trade liberalization and the dismantling of restrictions to foreign investment. At the same time, it has introduced an industrial development strategy which has made it possible to promote the dissemination of technology and the emergence of new productive sectors which could hardly have developed on their own. The adoption of this model reflects the belief of the Colombian Government in the benefits of trade liberalization as a tool for modernization and economic growth contributing to the development and welfare of our population.

At the same time, Colombia considers the reorganization of production to be a necessary complement to the liberalization process. To that end it has drawn up a specific competitiveness strategy which aims to facilitate restructuring in the framework of an open economy. The mechanisms set forth in the WTO Agreements for use by the developing countries in boosting the competitiveness and productivity of their economies, paving the way to increased participation in foreign markets, have been of considerable use in this respect. Only through increased productivity will it be possible to improve our competitiveness. We must recognize, however, that the ability to take advantage of existing incentives depends on the country's level of income and available resources. Thus, as the transition periods granted to the developing countries begin to run out, it will be necessary to find new forms of stimulation in keeping with their needs and possibilities.

Technological development has opened up new possibilities and opportunities for trade. Thus, electronic tools are gradually being introduced as a vehicle for transactions. The World Trade Organization must not lose sight of this reality, and must begin conducting analyses with a view to establishing disciplines in the area of electronic trade.

Finally, Colombia reaffirms its interest in and commitment to proceeding with the negotiations agreed in the Marrakesh Agreement in both the agricultural and the services sectors as a continuation of the process begun with the Uruguay Round. What is needed is a clear and precise procedure to facilitate their preparation and the establishment of their framework and structure. Colombia is ready to explore the extension of the negotiations to additional sectors or disciplines, but before committing ourselves we would be wise to gather more information and conduct further analyses on the impact of the results of the Uruguay Round on our economies and on the evolution of foreign trade, and to reflect on our experience in implementing the different Agreements so that we can deepen the liberalization process and the disciplines of the multilateral system in a way that is consistent with its objectives and principles and takes account of conditions in the developing countries.
