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Statement Circulated by H.E. Dr. Günter Rexrodt,
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Tomorrow, we will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of GATT. It is a tremendous achievement: 50 years of the rule-based multilateral trading system. Open markets and free competition have fostered an efficient division of labour, technological innovation and economic benefits -- for all the contracting parties.

World trade and investment flows have become the engine of growth and prosperity for the world economy.

During the 50 years, many Member countries have escaped from the darkness of poverty to become so-called "emerging economies".

And many others have freed themselves from central economic planning to become successful transition economies.

This is clear proof of the outstanding achievements of the GATT and the WTO.

It justifies our political will and political courage to press ahead. We have been on the right track for the last 50 years, and we must stick to it as we enter the next century.

Countries still outside the WTO should become full Members as soon as possible, recognizing the rules of the system.

We want the WTO to be a truly universal organization.

Let us direct our work today and tomorrow to a proper review of the implementation of our existing commitments, and to a broad understanding on the preparation of new comprehensive negotiations in the year 2000.

I am well aware that, for a considerable number of WTO Members, the main priority is on full implementation of the existing obligations.

And I myself, am convinced that it is vital to fully implement and apply the multilateral rules we agreed in the Uruguay Round.

But, while this is an essential aspect of all our work, it must not prevent us from looking ahead.

The built-in agenda means that, as of the year 2000, we shall need to review many important Agreements in the WTO anyway.

Some of the most important and complex issues here are agriculture and trade in services.

The main purpose of all of these negotiations will be an improvement in market access.

We learned in the Uruguay Round that these negotiations can only be successful if they are conducted on a comprehensive basis with political support from all WTO Members.

If we are to face the challenges and to seize the opportunities of globalization, we must commit ourselves to an ambitious agenda once again.

The agenda decided upon in Singapore focuses on government procurement, trade facilitation, and the so called "trade and" issues, like investment, competition and environment.

We must build on that and strive for additional liberalization in areas like industrial tariffs and non-tariff barriers.

We live in a world of diversity, and different countries have different levels of development.

To ease the integration of the developing countries into the multilateral system, we have agreed on special and differential treatment.

My Government strongly supports all efforts in WTO, ITC and UNCTAD which are designed to further improve market access for exports from developing countries, to strengthen the export capability of these countries by technical assistance, and to create the conditions for the application of multilateral rules.

This would weaken the forces of protectionism -- forces which are always on the look-out for scapegoats and excuses.

Free markets and equal opportunities can never be a one way road.

But I don't have to remind this Conference that we, the most developed countries, have a greater responsibility.

We must develop free markets and provide free market access for the weakest countries in the global system.

Painful setbacks, like the financial crisis in some Asian economies, must not deflect us from these commitments.

People must understand that Asia is not facing a crisis of the multilateral system.

Instead, the crisis is caused by a lack of functioning institutions and a lack of transparent rules.

More than ever before, we must now work with an open mind towards structural reforms, regulatory reforms, adaptation to new technologies and innovation.

This Ministerial Meeting is a unique opportunity to define a clear political orientation for our future work and negotiations.

The General Council should prepare the ground for the coming negotiations in substance, so that Ministers can decide to launch the negotiations at their third meeting in 1999.

We, as Ministers of trade, are responsible for securing and strengthening the multilateral system; we must therefore not restrict ourselves to only taking stock at this meeting. It is time to prepare new initiatives for trade and investment liberalization.
