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HIGH-LEVEL SESSION - COMMEMORATING AFGHANISTAN'S 5TH ANNIVERSARY OF WTO MEMBERSHIP

THURSDAY, 29 JULY, 13:00-14:30 CEST (HYBRID FORMAT: ZOOM / ROOM S3)

Statement by Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General, WTO

His Excellency Sulaiman Bin Shah, Deputy Minister of Industry and Commerce of Afghanistan,

Ambassador Sayed Ramin Ziway, Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the WTO,

Ms Pamela Coke-Hamilton, Executive Director of ITC,

Dr Patrick Low, former WTO Chief Economist,

Dear participants,

It is my utmost pleasure to be with you today, for this special occasion to celebrate Afghanistan's 5th anniversary of WTO membership.

I would like to start by congratulating the Government of Afghanistan and its people for their 5 years of WTO Membership. Five years is a good reflection point in the WTO context, not only in evaluating and appreciating the achievements Afghanistan has made, but also in setting the course for the next five years and more. Special thanks to the ITC for commissioning, and to Patrick for undertaking, the study to examine developments in Afghanistan during the last five years, including economic performance and their participation in WTO activities.

Afghanistan's 5-year membership journey has been a positive story, that is a story of hope, for the country, LDCs, countries in accession, and the WTO. It is a story that confirms that the values of the multilateral trading system – openness, non-discrimination, transparency, good governance, and the rule of law – can deliver for fragile, and conflict affected countries and for their people. It is a story of the opportunities for these people to realize their economic potential and improve their livelihoods.

Without claiming the causality, it is heartening to see improvements in Afghanistan's economic performance from a modest rate 1.5% of annual GDP growth in 2015, the year when the accession negotiations were concluded, to 3.9% in 2019, before the pandemic hit. It is also encouraging to witness a faster growth of the share of agriculture contributing to the source of value-added in the economy, partly due to the significant uptick in agricultural exports, as total overall exports significantly increased during the same period. We could only imagine how people's lives may have changed under these numbers. Hopefully, these are just the beginning.

For Afghanistan, WTO membership has been a key aspect of its domestic reform agenda in the creation of a market-economy after decades of conflicts which destroyed institutions. As an LDC, Afghanistan has undertaken a large number of so-called "high-quality" accession commitments, covering a range of regulations on WTO rules which would support its efforts on state-building and institution-building, along with market access commitments in goods and services which reflect the country's readiness to embrace openness. After 5 years, the ITC study indicates that 60% of these commitments have been implemented, while the rest are on-going. Outside the WTO, Afghanistan's reform efforts are also well recognized, for instance, in the World Bank's Doing Business Index where it was named the Best Reformer in 2019.

In the WTO, Afghanistan's contributions during the last five years cannot be underestimated. Establishing a first LDC Permanent Mission dedicated to the WTO, their active participation in the day-to-day work in WTO bodies and committees, including to serve as Chairman of the Trade Facilitation Committee and the Committee on Trade and Development - has set an example of how to maximize membership, not only for LDCs but other resource-constrained developing countries. Not only has their hard work and presence in meeting rooms put Afghanistan on the WTO map, but it is already ready to support others, especially those fragile and conflict-affected states.

Today's Trade for Peace Programme would not have come to life, without Afghanistan's vision to harness economic integration as an instrument to promote peace and stability. At the WTO 10th Ministerial Conference in Nairobi in December 2015, as WTO membership adopted the accession package, the representative of Afghanistan said as follows:

"WTO membership has always been an integral part of our strategic objectives to achieve economic stability, improve regional security and cooperation and achieve everlasting peace."

To implement this vision, Afghanistan, together with Liberia - another civil war torn LDC that joined the WTO at the same Conference - created a new group, the g7+ WTO Accessions Group, to highlight and bring the attention of the membership to the specific challenges posed by war, conflict, insecurity, fragility, and also the opportunities that integration through WTO membership can offer to those who have suffered. Trade for Peace has been a story of hope in the WTO.

Today, we are here to not only celebrate the achievements made by Afghanistan during the last five years, but also to pledge our commitment and support to the Government and its people as they face challenges on different fronts. What we have learned from Afghanistan during accession and post-accession is hard work, determination, and creativity. The WTO Secretariat will be honored to accompany the next chapters of Afghanistan's WTO journey.

I thank you.
