

HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE ON WTO/ASEAN ACCESSION OF TIMOR-LESTE: HIGH LEVEL OPENING

*"Maximizing benefits from ASEAN and WTO accessions
as pathway to achieve 2030 development goals"*

***Remarks of H.E. Amb. Rui Macieira, Chairperson of the Working
Party on the Accession of Timor-Leste***

Tuesday, 12 July, 9h00 – 13h00 (OTL)

Dear Excellency – Honourable President Ramos Horta,

Dear Excellency – Honourable Prime Minister Matan Ruak,

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

From the outset, let me express what a great pleasure it is to finally be here in Dili to personally meet and engage with the Timorese government at the highest level, after having collaborated and closely worked with you from Geneva for the past years. I thank the government of Timor-Leste for the invitation and look forward to the next days in Dili.

Let me start my remarks with a question: How exemplary and ambitious can a country be? The answer for Timor-Leste sets the bar very

high. Having applied for WTO accession in April 2015 and having its Working Party established in December 2016 – which is very recent if you compare with other WTO accessions - Timor-Leste has registered remarkable progress in its WTO accession effort. Despite challenges faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and technical and capacity constraints caused by its LDC status, Timor-Leste has held 3 cycles of Working Party meetings in just 18 months: in October 2020, July 2021 and April 2022 and has moved from the initial fact-finding discussions with WTO Members on its foreign trade regime to negotiating the entirety of the parameters of its future accession package.

The government has also made progress on the bilateral front, with the signature of bilateral market access agreements with two interested Members, and pioneered in joining the WTO joint initiative on Services Domestic Regulation in June, as the first acceding government and LDC to do so. This process sets an example of efficient and successful negotiations to other acceding governments on which I reported, as the WP Chair, to all WTO Members at the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference in June. It is my assessment that, at this pace, Timor-Leste's accession is well on track for conclusion by end of year, or early next year, provided that all remaining elements are agreed with Members, especially on market access, and all

necessary legislative work is undertaken to set up WTO-consistent frameworks for the implementation of the WTO commitments. I urge the Government to keep up with its intensive engagement with WTO Members, aiming to finalise all discussions as expeditiously as possible. Once we have a set of updated documentation ready for the next meeting of the Working Party, which my WTO Secretariat colleagues – Ms Maika Oshikawa and Ms Anna Varyanik – will also be assisting you on during this visit, it will be my intention to have the next, 4th meeting of the Working Party early in the fall, aiming to finalise all substantive negotiations with Members as much as possible. This meeting will be followed by the 5th Working Party cycle later in the year, or early next year, which should close all remaining gaps. This said, it is a very intense period ahead of us and I count on participation of all involved domestic stakeholders, especially the Parliament.

I also recognize that the path to WTO membership may not be without challenges, as all significant achievements. Yet, the government's sustained high-level commitment to accession is very clear, and I deeply appreciate the effort made at the political and technical levels to move the process forward. I can see the progress which derives directly from the energy and dedication you have put into this endeavour, supported by an extensive coordinated effort by donors and development partners. I urge the

Government to continue engaging with all partners as we move forward, with the aim to deliver the accession but also set the foundation for the post-accession implementation phase where more active work will start later in the year.

On this note, as the title of this session suggests, WTO accession can be seen as a **pathway** to achieve development goals. The same can be true for ASEAN accession. I am well aware of Timor-Leste's twin goal of achieving ASEAN and WTO Membership, which I may say is an ambitious attempt commensurate to the fierce drive the government has displayed so far in the multilateral front at the WTO.

I would like to reiterate that the two processes are complementary and mutually supportive in achieving the Timor-Leste's development goals. Both multilateral and regional trade integration frameworks aim at their core to ensure security and predictability for traders, enhance market access, establish good governance benchmarks, support domestic reforms and strengthen international cooperation. As such, they provide the building blocks for increasing trade flows that can foster economic and social development, providing enhanced prospects for prosperity, sustainable peace and security.

As both accessions are strategic priorities for Timor-Leste, it is critical to coordinate efforts in terms of policy and institutional strategy to fully reap the benefits of concurrent participation in multiple trade arrangements. It is particularly important to ensure internal coherence in the identification of domestic development needs and priorities and draw clear strategies to simultaneously achieve consistency with the legal and institutional frameworks at the regional and multilateral level.

Carving the pathway to WTO membership in parallel with ASEAN accession may be demanding, but Timor-Leste's proven track record of successfully overcoming challenges will certainly prove very useful in this regard. In my capacity as Chair of the Working Party on the WTO Accession of Timor-Leste, rest assured that I am committed to doing everything within my reach to facilitate this process.

I hope today's timely discussion can add key insights on the synergies between regional and multilateral trade integration and shed light on the way forward for Timor-Leste to achieve both ASEAN and WTO accessions, as early as possible, as part of the vision and development strategy of the government.

Thank you.