My memories of the Uruguay Round



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Note: The original text was provided in Spanish

I am very honoured to have been asked to share some memories of my participation in the Uruguay Round negotiations. I was very young then, being in Geneva was my first posting, and I was a mere Third Secretary for a small developing country, so my memories are not of key moments in the negotiations. But the Round was named after my country and both the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uruguay, Enrique Iglesias, and my Ambassador of the Delegation to the GATT, Julio Lacarte Muró, had played key roles in its launch and continued to do so throughout the Round. If only for those two reasons, my personal experience was very valuable and left me with unforgettable memories.

When I arrived in Geneva, I was convinced that I would be involved in something great, which would represent a qualitative leap in the legal certainty that was so necessary for my country and the world. Thirty years later, I am fully aware of how extraordinary it was to be able to work, at such a young age, with that feeling and that conviction, and I am very grateful for that.

The level of ambition was high and dreams were in their infancy at the launch of the negotiations and when I arrived at the GATT in April 1991; the main obstacles had been overcome with the Blair House Agreement of 1992. The draft "Final Act" was beginning to be drawn up.

The sight of Arthur Dunkel, wreathed in the smoke of his cigarette, is mixed in my memories with the kind smile of Mario behind the reception desk, who welcomed everyone who came through the door. I recall the lengthy Council meetings, flanked by the United States delegation on my right and the Venezuelan delegation on my left, and Mr Lacarte's imperturbable face as he took endless notes in each meeting with a level of concentration and accuracy that amazed me.

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As Third and Second Secretary (yes, I was promoted in those years), I was never entirely clear about what was really happening. The anecdotes from the "Green Room" that we heard at each meeting merged with the very measured information that Mr Lacarte gave us when he received other ambassadors for their "confessional" conversations.

From the inexperience and eagerness to learn of every beginner, my most abiding memory of those years is of running from one negotiating group to another, overwhelmed by the complexity and multiplicity of issues and by the high standards expected of me working under Mr Lacarte's direction.

I had the enormous privilege of participating in the negotiating group that drafted the texts of the future agreements that would establish the new WTO and its dispute settlement system.

In what was known then as "Room B", Mr Lacarte chaired and successfully concluded those negotiations. The long working sessions that lasted until dawn, with a break to eat the pizzas brought to us in large cardboard boxes, continued to the end of the Round. It was fascinating; I was surrounded by experienced negotiators, excellent jurists and wonderful people.

I enjoyed the effort, both physical and intellectual, that it required of me, from beginning to end. What I learned then has formed the basis for who I am today in many respects, both professionally and personally.

As a Uruguayan woman, I am proud of the contribution that my country made to that Round because I am convinced that the multilateral trading system that resulted from it –

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based on cooperation, mutual respect among nations and the commitment of all, both industrialized and developing countries, to respect the rules agreed upon – serves both the global interests and the needs of every developing country.

For me, the WTO is the symbol of this desire for international cooperation and, 30 years later, in the face of the crisis that the system is currently experiencing, I hope that no one will give way to apathy and that the same conviction that inspired my generation will motivate new generations.