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Joining the WTO

- **Accession negotiations resumed with The Bahamas after a six-year pause. Both Comoros and Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose negotiations reached “technical maturity”, aim for accession in 2019.**
- **South Sudan activated its accession process. Its working party met for the first time in early 2019.**
- **The WTO Secretariat supported efforts by Ethiopia, Serbia, Sudan and Uzbekistan to resume their WTO accession processes in 2019.**
- **An Informal Group of Acceding Governments was launched to address the growing desire for better coordination among acceding governments. An Informal Dialogue of Acceding Least-Developed Countries (LDCs) will seek to promote cooperation among acceding LDCs.**

Background on joining the WTO

The WTO is open to states or customs territories with full autonomy over their external commercial relations. To join, a government has to bring its economic and trade policies into line with WTO rules and principles and negotiate with the WTO membership on guaranteed minimum levels of access to their domestic markets for goods and services. The accession process promotes the integration of new members into the global economy. An accession process begins when WTO members accept an application and establish a working party. It concludes when the membership and the acceding government both accept a negotiated accession package.

Since the WTO was launched in 1995, 36 members have joined the organization. Twenty-two states or separate customs territories are currently seeking to join.

The Bahamas

The accession process of The Bahamas resumed in 2018 after six years, with the third meeting of the working party on the accession taking place in September in Geneva. During this meeting, the government announced its strong commitment to the accession process, “with a goal of December 2019/MC12”.

Mr Brent Symonette, the Minister of Financial Services, Trade and Industry and Immigration, noted that the Caribbean country has launched economic reforms to diversify the economy.

The Chair of the Working Party, Ambassador Andrew Staines (United Kingdom), said that the accession process of The Bahamas “is strategically important, not only for herself and her reform agenda, but also for the region”. The Bahamas is the last nation in the Americas outside the WTO.

On the margins of the working party meeting, the Bahamian delegation held bilateral meetings and a plurilateral meeting on agriculture. WTO members commended the work done by the government and expressed their support for a swift negotiating process. They also noted there is significant yet doable work ahead to advance bilateral market access negotiations and to fully bring The Bahamas’ foreign trade regime and legislation in line with WTO requirements. The fourth meeting took place in the first quarter of 2019.



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Bosnia and Herzegovina aims to conclude its accession process in 2019.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

At the 13th meeting of the working party on 8 February 2018, WTO members supported the swift conclusion of the negotiations and welcomed the strong commitment and desire by Sarajevo to finalize the process. Bosnia and Herzegovina started its accession negotiations in July 1999. Sarajevo has concluded all but one of its bilateral market access negotiations and worked with members to resolve a few outstanding negotiating issues.

The meeting of the working party was the first in nearly five years. The accession had reached “technical maturity”, said the Chair of the working party, Ambassador Atanas Paporizov of Bulgaria. Bosnia and Herzegovina aims to conclude the accession process in 2019.

Belarus

At the 10th meeting of the Working Party, held on 15 May, WTO members stressed their readiness to work towards the country's WTO accession and urged Minsk to take appropriate policy decisions to make a decisive push forward. The meeting was the third since the resumption of the working party's work in January 2017.

On the bilateral front, Belarus said it has concluded 17 bilateral market access agreements. While recognizing the progress made, some members asked Belarus for further clarification on a wide range of issues, including its investment regime, state ownership, import and export regulations and intellectual property rights.

Comoros

Comoros reaffirmed its high-level political commitment to conclude its accession negotiations as soon as possible. At the fourth meeting of the working party, held on 28 March 2018, members urged Comoros to complete the process of bringing the country's foreign trade regime fully into conformity with WTO rules and requirements. Working party Chair Ambassador Chávez Basagoitia (Peru) said that legislative work still to be done “is the keystone of this accession”. Domestic reforms and legislative work are essential in all accessions and in the case of the Comoros, a major effort remained to be made, he said.

South Sudan

South Sudan activated its accession process in 2018 following the establishment of its working party in December 2017. The country, the world's newest nation, circulated its memorandum on the foreign trade regime – a comprehensive summary of the acceding government's foreign trade regime, including relevant statistical data. The first meeting of the working party was held during the first quarter of 2019.

Sudan, Serbia, Ethiopia and Uzbekistan

The WTO Secretariat undertook two technical missions to Khartoum, Sudan, with the objective of collecting information on the country's trade policies. The fifth meeting of the working party, which last met in 2017, is envisaged for 2019.

Throughout the year, Serbia has been actively engaged with the Secretariat, which visited Belgrade, on the technical update of the accession documentation required for formal resumption of the working party in 2019 once outstanding domestic legislative action is completed. Serbia's working party last met in June 2013.

As part of Ethiopia's efforts to re-energize its accession process, a meeting took place between DG Azevêdo and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia in January 2019. The Secretariat has been working with Ethiopia's negotiating

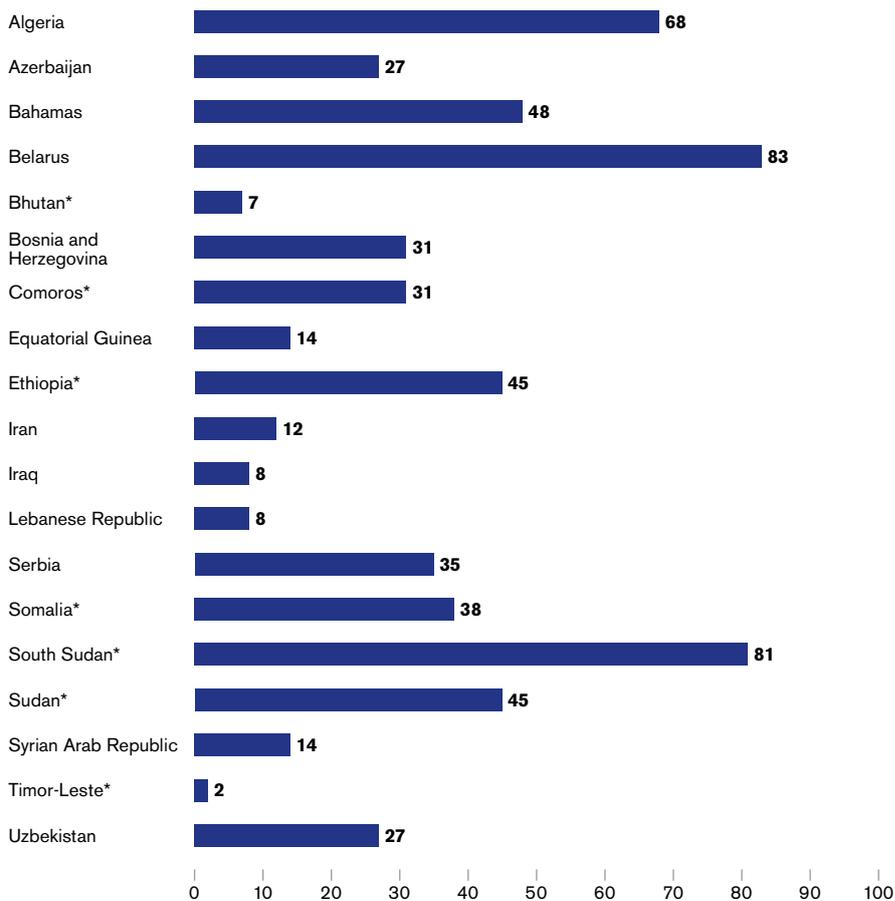
team on the technical update of the accession documentation required for formal resumption of the working party in 2019. Ethiopia's working party last met in March 2012.

The Secretariat visited Tashkent twice to support Uzbekistan's efforts to reactivate its accession process, which has been inactive since 2005. A formal resumption of the working party is envisaged for 2019.

Other accession processes

Equatorial Guinea, whose working party was established in 2008, engaged with the Secretariat with the aim of resuming its accession process in 2019. Iraq submitted an updated memorandum on the foreign trade regime in 2018. A third meeting of Iraq's working party, established in 2004, will be scheduled when it submits its initial market access offers on goods and services and replies to questions raised by members.

Figure 1: Participants from acceding governments in WTO technical assistance activities, 2018



*least-developed country

Technical assistance and outreach

In 2018, over 600 participants from acceding governments were invited to participate in WTO technical assistance and capacity-building activities (see Figure 1).

The seventh China Round Table on WTO accessions, which aims to assist acceding LDCs, took place on 26-27 September in Astana, Kazakhstan, under the theme “Eurasian perspectives on the future of the multilateral trading system: accessions and the evolution of WTO rules”. DG Azevêdo underscored the need to fully integrate Eurasian economies into the global trading system through WTO accessions. “For acceding members, the process of WTO accession has usually accompanied structural transformation of the domestic economy, and a reshaping of trading relationships regionally and globally,” he told the round table.

Significant efforts were made to expand outreach activities aimed at promoting experience-sharing

among acceding governments. A newly established Informal Group of Acceding Governments was launched to address a growing need for better coordination among these governments while an Informal Dialogue of Acceding LDCs was established to promote cooperation among these countries.

A series of new activities was launched under the “Trade for Peace” initiative, coordinated by the Accessions Division. Approximately two-thirds of acceding governments are considered conflict-afflicted or fragile economies. The initiative aims at promoting WTO accession as a pathway to economic growth, development and stability, thereby contributing to peace.

As a follow-up to a first meeting held in Nairobi in 2017, the WTO Secretariat organized the second Regional Dialogue on WTO Accessions for the Greater Horn of Africa in Djibouti on 3-6 December 2018. The theme was “Promoting Trade for Peace through WTO Accessions”.

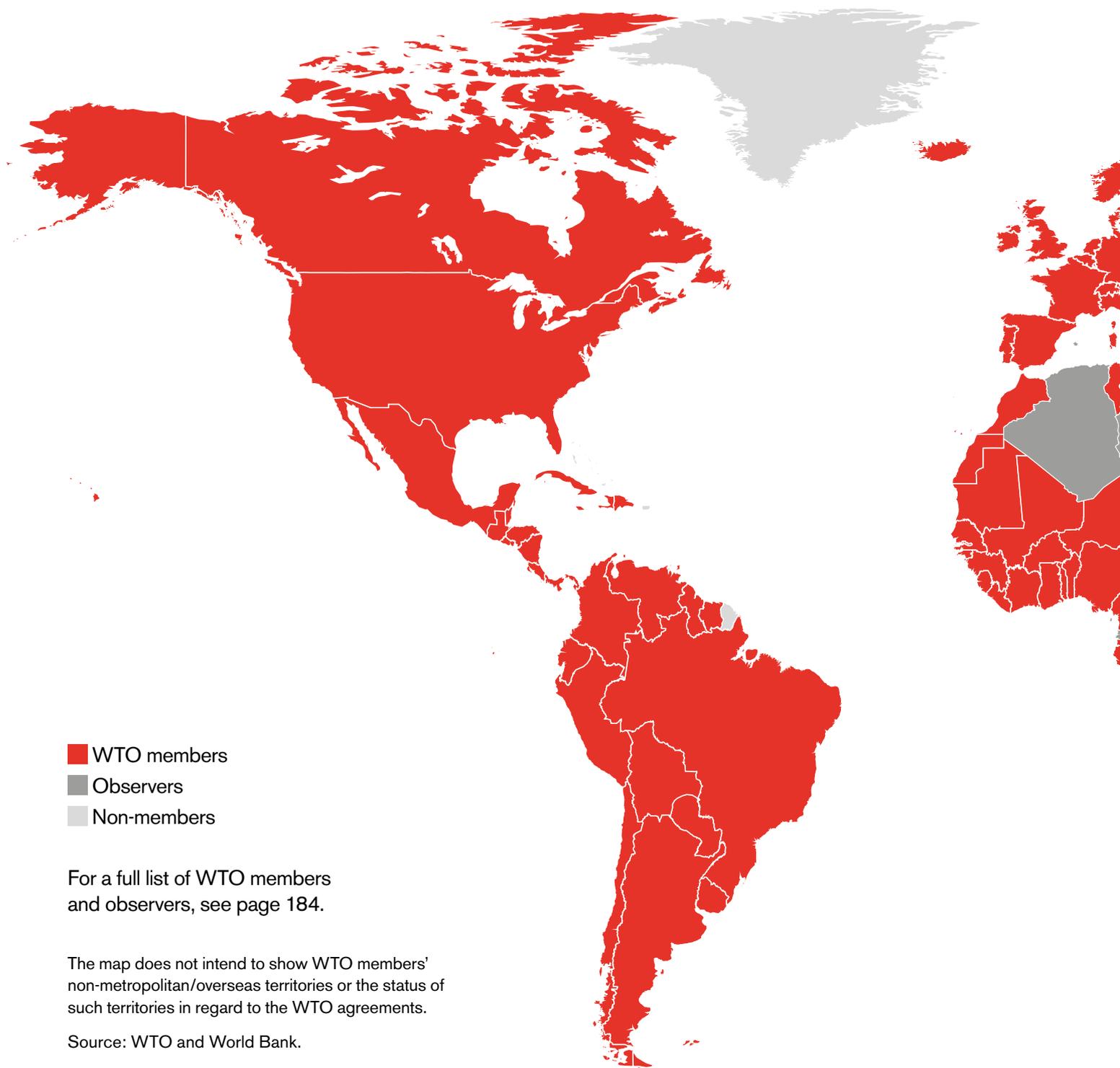
The seventh China Round Table on WTO accession took place in Astana in September.



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A global membership

The WTO's 164 members represent 98 per cent of world trade.



- WTO members
- Observers
- Non-members

For a full list of WTO members and observers, see page 184.

The map does not intend to show WTO members' non-metropolitan/overseas territories or the status of such territories in regard to the WTO agreements.

Source: WTO and World Bank.



