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GABON

Statement by H.E. Mr Paul Biyoghe Mba
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On behalf of the President of the Gabonese Republic, His Excellency El Hadj Omar Bongo, and the Government of Gabon, I thank you for your initiatives and endeavours to stimulate international trade and improve the organization and fairness of the trading system.

The multilateral trading system in which we are all stakeholders is today – even more than in the past – developing in an environment marked by strong ambitions, urgent demands, media-driven protests and conflicts of interest. However, one thing remains certain: the developing countries, and the least-developed in particular, continue to be afflicted by a serious imbalance.

Nevertheless, our participation in these meetings bears witness to our faith in the World Trade Organization. Thus, Gabon is resolutely committed to the multilateral trading system. This commitment has been reflected in recent years, among other things, in the organization in Libreville, in November 2000, of the first WTO meeting of African trade ministers and Gabon's appearance before the Trade Policy Review Body, in Geneva, in June 2001.

Similarly, and on a daily basis, Gabon is endeavouring to further liberalize its market, in particular through the diversification of its partners, the implementation of economic reforms and the growing importance of the private sector, represented of course by large companies in the oil, mining and forestry sectors, but with an increasing emphasis as well on the SMEs and SMIs, and even on revenue-generating activities.

Particularly in the context of the commitments entered into with the Bretton Woods institutions, my country is seeking to make its economy more flexible and more liberal.

For that reason, to a greater extent than in the past, autonomous liberalization must be taken into account in our negotiations in the same way as our commitments, and the evaluation of such liberalization must take its rightful place on our agenda.

These efforts cannot, however, be conclusive and perceptible unless our specific features are taken into account. The international community's commitment to institutional support and capacity-building, particularly in the context of technical assistance, remains a topical issue. They hold the key to implementation of the agreements. They were provided for in the Marrakesh Agreements and reaffirmed in the Doha Declaration. It remains for us to give them more concrete shape, here and now.

Special and differential treatment must not be regarded as merely a standard formula, but rather as an important means for our States to adhere to the realities of their commitments under the multilateral trading system. Similarly, the WTO must continue its efforts to maintain preferences,

since Gabon, like many other developing countries, has commitments at the subregional (CEMAC, ECOCAS), and regional (African Union) levels, or again in the context of the ACP/European Union partnership, and the AGOA, which are crucial instruments for building competitive economies.

Gabon has a stake in consolidating the multilateral framework through the improvement and clarification of the existing rules. However, as we have always stated, any deepening of the negotiations and any extension to new fields presupposes implementation of the commitments undertaken by the different parties, and consideration of the following key factors:

- The need to genuinely incorporate the development dimension through the effective implementation of special and differential treatment;
- the definition of effective sustainable development policies;
- adherence to a reasonable, pragmatic level of ambition, so as to avoid over-elaborate, and therefore unrealistic, commitments;
- consideration of the situation of countries with small populations;
- the need to introduce more flexibility by basing any new multilateral agreement on consensual general principles; such flexibility should guarantee that a fair balance is struck between multilateral commitments and autonomous national policies. In the final analysis, it is necessary to promote maximum coherence.

This coherence, which must be both national and international, would be reflected in greater coordination of policies among the development institutions and the other multilateral organizations, including the IMF, the World Bank, WTO, etc.

Gabon is no stranger to the ills afflicting most developing countries, namely: economic crisis, excessive debt burden, AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, persistent poverty.

Gabon's current classification as an upper middle income country is unfair and quite wrongly prevents it from being eligible for all existing preferential schemes in respect of debt, financing and various supports.

Moreover, Gabon, which depends on foreign countries for nearly 85 per cent of its food requirements, will now endeavour to have its net food importer status recognized in order to confirm this economic and social reality and receive the attendant benefits; its food security depends on this.

Participation in world trade must be of potential benefit to all countries, otherwise such trade will continue to be perceived as unequal. In this connection, we particularly support the sectoral initiative in favour of cotton and hope that, in due course, it will be extended to other basic commodities. Similarly, we support all initiatives aimed at curbing mechanisms that distort the free operation of the market, including in particular subsidies which heavily penalize producers in developing countries.

Our countries are increasingly committed to taking control of their own destinies. That is the significance of our commitment within NEPAD, which recently moreover, on 12 August 2003, was made a ministerial department in Gabon, this being an obvious sign of the particular emphasis and hope which Gabon attaches to this important programme. It is only natural that we should once again request decisive support from the international community for the immediate and gradual implementation of NEPAD.

I should like to conclude by once again expressing Gabon's deep and sincere appreciation and encouragement for the undeniably efficient contribution of the various participants in the Fifth WTO Ministerial Conference, a contribution which brings sustainable hopes and expectations within reach.
