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REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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On behalf of the Government of the Republic of Congo, I welcome the holding of the Fourth Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization, the preparations for which have brought both hope and anxiety.

I say hope, because this Conference will afford us an opportunity, after the failure at Seattle, to again exchange ideas and proceed together to redefine the development outlook for our economies.

I say anxiety, because so many events, sometimes very painful, have shaken the world recently, to such an extent that doubt was cast on whether it would be possible to hold this meeting and above all on the chances of success.

Therefore, our meeting here in Doha is in itself a challenge that the international community has taken up against an economic and political background marked by a slowdown in growth, disinvestment, unemployment, persistent poverty in developing countries, and widespread uncertainty and fear.

Hence, it is time here to pay tribute to the courage of the WTO Secretariat, which has spared no effort, despite many pitfalls, in organizing this Conference.

I also take advantage of this opportunity to thank the Emir of Qatar, His Highness Sheikh Hamed Bin Khalifa-Al-Thani, and the Government and people of this beautiful country for their hospitality and the extremely warm welcome they have extended to our delegation.

In the past two years, we in the Congo have thought at length about the real reasons for the failure of the Seattle Conference.

We have found not only incomprehension, contradictions and sometimes egotism shown by some Members of our Organization but have also noted the unshakeable will of other Members to reach equitable solutions that are beneficial to all States.

The Republic of Congo wishes to reaffirm its commitment to the latter view and it urges all WTO Members to display humanism and solidarity.

At a time when our economies are becoming increasingly interdependent, it would seem an illusion to expect lasting development or sustainable growth if we do not institute balanced trade rules or mechanisms that are profitable to one and all.

We have seen in the course of the preparations for this Conference that a number of meetings have been held, from the G7 to the LDCs, but also by the European Union, the ACP and by other regional or subregional organizations.

On these different occasions, in which the Ministers present at this Doha Conference participated, the subjects of debate at our meeting had already been sufficiently scrutinized, and this should enable us to move rapidly towards commitments and at last come out of the tunnel we went into after Seattle.

Once again, we are faced with two big issues: the implementation of the Uruguay Round Agreements and the launching of a new round of negotiations.

These are both sensitive and complex questions because of the turmoil we have already experienced and the issues at stake in the future.

The World Trade Organization therefore stands at the crossroads.

With reference to implementation, the Republic of Congo would like to express its concern about the very discouraging results achieved since the Seattle Conference.

As to our overall concerns, particularly market access, agriculture, customs tariffs, TRIPS, and so on, very little progress has been made. This is compounded by the question of technical assistance which is still inappropriate and ill-distributed.

In short, the Uruguay Round Agreements have still not brought any substantial support for the process of developing the weak economies.

As to a new round of negotiations, it should be noted that the refusal or the resistance displayed by some towards launching a new round is often a result more of dissatisfaction with the present agreements than actual indifference to the new topics.

The Republic of Congo, for its part, is in favour of any initiative designed to carry on the trade liberalization process in a climate of understanding and mutual trust that will take proper account of the specific needs and difficulties of the still vulnerable economies.

For this reason, we reaffirm our country's complete support for the Declaration of the Ministers of Trade of the OAU/AU Member countries, drawn up at Abuja, and endorsed by the African Group in Geneva.

Our position is therefore clear: Africa's economic development and its integration in the world system should lie at the core of the debate and thus constitute one of the major objectives of this Conference.

To this end, the so-called Singapore issues, namely investment, competition, government procurement, environment and trade facilitation, among others, should be addressed from the trade standpoint by clearly defining and specifying the goals to be achieved, as well as the implementation mechanisms, in the light of the present management capacities of developing countries.

In recent weeks, in the preparations for this Conference, Africa has been engaged in discussions with its European, American and other partners.

We have taken note of the commitments on both sides in the context of technical assistance and capacity-building.

We cannot fail to praise the initiatives taken under the Cotonou Agreement and the AGOA.

The measures envisaged in this new environment will definitely enable Africa and other developing countries to glimpse the prospect of a rather more optimistic future.

However, in view of the implementation time-frames, is this enough, to enable our countries to enter into another round of discussions if we cannot rely on promises of assistance?

For all these reasons, we recommend that future discussions on the new topics should be accompanied by parallel action that will allow Africa to move to later implementation of future agreements with real chances of success.

I should like, in conclusion, to express the hope that the work of the Fourth WTO Conference will lead to an outcome that is satisfactory for everyone.
