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LEBANON

Statement circulated by H.E. Dr. Nasser Saidi, Minister of Economy and Trade

(As an Observer)

It is a great honour for Lebanon to be present at the Third Ministerial Conference of the WTO. On behalf of Lebanon, I would like to thank the Government of the United States of America and the WTO Secretariat for hosting and organizing this very important Conference.

For almost 50 years, GATT was the foremost institutional framework for the regulation and liberalization of international trade in goods. With non-discrimination as its cardinal principle, GATT succeeded to a significant extent in fulfilling its primary functions in the post-war international economic era.

Lebanon was one of the founding fathers of the post-war multilateral trading system, and it contributed greatly in the shaping and the making of the GATT rules. For instance, the free-trade area exception to non-discrimination was based on a proposal introduced in the negotiations by Lebanon and Syria.

Today, more than fifty years later, Lebanon is negotiating its re-accession to the multilateral trading system. It has applied to join the WTO earlier this year and has observer status since 14 April 1999.

Despite many years of turmoil, Lebanon's commitment to the rules and the principles of the multilateral trade regime never weakened. Today, our commitment to a liberal trade regime is as firm as ever.

We have gone a long way in fulfilling the requirements of full membership to the WTO, whether by amending non-compliant legislation, or by introducing new laws and regulations in new areas and sectors. In one of the most contentious areas of the WTO, that is in the area of intellectual property, we have enacted new laws that comply with the TRIPS obligations. Furthermore, we have established a National Committee whose mission is to prepare Lebanon for accession to the WTO.

The process of accession is becoming more and more difficult for newcomers. Cumbersome procedures and, not infrequently, demands that go beyond the obligations of other WTO Members have been the rule rather than the exception recently. This will delay the integration of the rest of the world in the WTO and world trading system and is likely to lead to a crisis of legitimacy and fairness for the whole system.

There are 135 Members in the WTO, with more than 40 countries currently in the process of accession. Some have been in that process for many years with no end in sight for their struggle to become full Members. In the run up to the new round of multilateral trade negotiations, this is unlikely to be in the interest of the rule-based regime and the WTO and we urge WTO Members to be more considerate and fair in their demands from acceding countries.

A very important international organization such as the WTO cannot fulfil its significant role in the multilateral trading system and the international economic sphere, without granting all the countries access on equitable and fair basis. Only then can the World Trade Organization make an unquestionable claim to universality and to responsible globalization.

Technical assistance and cooperation has been, and is likely to continue to be, an important aspect of the accession process. The wide variety of agreements and sectors that were covered by the Uruguay Round make it very difficult for members to come to grips with their rights and obligations. This is more so in the case of newcomers, the overwhelming majority of whom are from developing countries. These often lack the necessary knowledge, let alone experience, in the law and practice of WTO and the new multilateral trade rules.

Such technical assistance should not only focus on courses, seminars, workshops and awareness raising, but it should also focus on extensive advisory services with respect to implementing legislation and institution building. This requires a substantive reallocation of budgetary resources to achieve this end.

Many international organizations are currently involved in providing technical assistance to developing countries, particularly those that are in the process of accession to the WTO. But there is little doubt that more needs to be done.

Once again, on behalf of Lebanon, I wish to reaffirm our commitment to the principles of the multilateral trading system as embodied in the WTO. We look forward to a speedy completion of our accession process and we are confident that we will soon regain our prominent role in international trade.
