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Statement by H.E. Dr. Tom Kitt, TD Minister of Trade

Our gathering at this, the third Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation, is very timely. We are meeting at the end of one Millennium and just before the start of another, to work towards developing the framework for the global trading system in the 21st century. It is an appropriate occasion for us to consider how the multilateral trading system can continue to make a vital contribution to enhancing sustainable growth, prosperity, jobs, an improved environment and better living and working conditions throughout the world. I hope that our time here in Seattle proves constructive and that we agree to the launch of a new comprehensive round of trade liberalization negotiations.

Eight rounds of trade liberalization and strengthening of multilateral trade rules have made a major contribution to global prosperity, development and rising living standards. Since 1951, global trade has grown seventeen-fold, world production has more than quadrupled, and world per capita income has doubled. The multilateral system has helped a large number of developing countries to successfully integrate into the international economy and developing countries' share of world export trade has increased by nearly 50 per cent over the past three years.

The WTO, since the conclusion of the Uruguay Round, has brought about major improvements in market access and more predictable rules that have benefited the Membership as a whole, in particular smaller countries. Over the period 1995-97, the volume of global trade increased by almost 8 per cent annually, far outpacing the growth in GNP. WTO and OECD studies on the impact of the Uruguay Round have confirmed the positive impact on the world economy as its results are taking effect.

Participation in a rules based, multilateral, international trading environment dedicated to free trade, open markets and broader liberalization has had a very beneficial effect on the economy of my own country.

Our exports have risen significantly and we are proud that we were able to maintain our export performance over the past two years; particularly given that 1998 was one of the most difficult years for international trade since World War II due to the impact of the Asian, and other, financial crises. However, despite this uncertainty in the world economy, it was critical for Ireland, and indeed for all other trading nations, that there should be no weakening in the strength of international commitment to liberalize trade and to promote open markets. Such a commitment and response represents the only hope for a lasting solution to international crises and is the surest means by which the world economy can return to the path of growth.

It is in this context that Ireland approaches a new 'Round' of trade negotiations at the WTO.

Ireland, in cooperation with our EU partners, is eager to set ambitious goals for the New Round. The reductions in barriers from the Uruguay Round in 1993, together with the establishment of the World Trade Organization, have been of direct benefit to Irish exporters, who have in turn been the main engine of economic growth here.

Along with all our European Union partners, Ireland supports the idea of a broad-based, comprehensive round of WTO negotiations to commence in 2000 and to be completed within three years. It is my belief that this is the best way to address the challenges resulting from rapid and far-reaching economic changes, to manage properly and effectively the globalization process, to promote equitable growth and development and to respond in a balanced manner to the interests of all WTO Members, in particular the developing countries.

In addition to proposing a detailed agenda to ensure that the needs of developing countries are concretely reflected in the negotiations, we also feel that the agenda for the New Round should, among other things, include further liberalization or rule-making in the fields of agriculture and services, non-agricultural tariffs, investment, competition, intellectual property, e-commerce, trade facilitation, government procurement, technical barriers to trade, core labour standards and trade and environment. Results in all areas should support and contribute to sustainable development.

Irish agriculture, like that of the rest of the EU, is based on an organisation of rural life that we believe must be preserved if great social, economic and environmental damage is to be avoided. Ireland therefore shares fully the objectives which the EU has set for itself in the negotiations on agriculture. These include:

- The striking of an appropriate balance between trade issues and non-trade issues which cover the social, economic and environmental concerns already referred to, as well as food safety and animal welfare;
- The treatment of all export supports on an equal basis;
- The continuation of the blue and green boxes.

On the basis that these objectives are appropriately provided for in the Ministerial Declaration, Ireland is willing to enter positively into the negotiations on agriculture.

Addressing the concerns of developing countries is another key strategy in Ireland and the EU's approach to the New Round.

Special and differential treatment for developing countries is already a cornerstone of existing WTO Agreements and in the New Round we feel there is a need to examine how these provisions can be implemented or changed so as to have a better impact for developing countries. The traditional approach has mainly been to base special and differential treatment for developing countries on extended implementation periods. Other methods, including human development indicators, can be examined during the future negotiations.

In addition, Ireland, along with the EU, are proposing that all industrialised countries commit themselves to granting duty and tariff free market access for products from least-developed countries by 2003. Capacity building, technical assistance and coherence between international bodies have also been identified by the EU as a contribution to the developing countries' concerns.

It is important that the genuine concerns and needs of both Developing Countries and Least-Developed Countries are identified and listened to, and that appropriate solutions are found to ensure that they positively benefit from and actively embrace a broad based New Round negotiation.

As evidence of our Ireland's commitment to developing countries, and as a previous Minister for Overseas Development in Ireland, I am especially pleased to have signed yesterday here in Seattle,

on behalf of the Irish Government, the Agreement establishing the Advisory Centre for Developing Countries on WTO Law.

The Centre will provide invaluable advice and assistance for developing countries - in particular the least developed - in defending their trade rights. It will address, in a small but significant way, one of the imbalances that exist between the developed and developing world.

Ireland's financial contribution to the Centre is an indication of our deep commitment to helping the developing world overcome its economic disadvantages. It also reflects our belief that free and fair trade, which has been one of the main engines of Ireland's recent record economic growth, is an essential element in assisting development.

In addition to a decision to launch a new round of trade negotiations, I would hope that this Ministerial will take decisions that will strengthen the WTO as an institution. These could include improvements to the Dispute Settlement Understanding, the creation of an institutional basis to better address development concerns, the improvement of cooperation between the WTO and other major international institutions and improved procedures to create greater transparency and public awareness of the WTO.

We attach particular importance to transparency and to the need for regular and structured contacts and exchanges with NGOs and Civil Society. In this regard, I would like to congratulate the WTO for organizing and hosting two very useful events in Geneva in March of this year, the High Level Symposium on Trade and Environment, which was followed by the High Level Symposium on Trade and Development. The holding of these symposia showed a willingness of Governments and Civil Society alike, to engage in an open and constructive dialogue. It is important that such exchanges continue during the New Round.

The issue of trade and labour standards is also one that we regard as important and appropriate for consideration. The EU proposal for a forum to consider the matter is a realistic way forward and one which I hope other delegations can rally to.

Traditionally business interests have achieved primacy in trade negotiations but now we must take a broader sweep of views into consideration. In this New Round and also here at Seattle, the views of NGOs and Civil Society must get an equal hearing along with business interests. We in the European Union feel strongly that the New Round should reflect the interests of society as a whole.

I believe that over these few days in Seattle, we can all work together, towards a successful outcome that takes into account, as far as possible, the views, attitudes and concerns of all and that we can go into the new Millennium with an agenda for a comprehensive round of trade liberalization.
