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In November 2001, at Doha, the Ministers of all the Members of the WTO undertook to launch a broad round of negotiations with a view to consolidating and deepening trade liberalization worldwide, with special emphasis on promoting the development of the world's poorest regions.

Nearly two years have gone by, and to me the commitment we entered into in Doha appears more important than ever. The global economy is at present in difficulty, with low growth, a slowdown in trade and a drop in foreign direct investment flows. The legal and institutional framework currently governing world trade is proving unequal to making the most of the growth opportunities associated with international trade.

In circumstances like these, there is greater political pressure to halt or even reverse the process of economic reform and trade liberalization. This is already occurring: protectionist tendencies are increasingly apparent in many parts of the world.

To bow to pressure is the worst response to the present challenges. But let us face facts: as long as we fail to produce real and viable alternative solutions that foster development worldwide, it will be difficult to resist such temptations successfully.

Therein lies the historic importance of our Doha Development Agenda: it offers viable solutions to the development problem, tangible benefits for the world's poorest regions, a way to positive participation by all the world's inhabitants in the prosperity that trade has shown itself able to generate. The Doha Round's potential for stimulating development goes beyond what we usually refer to as development matters. The most important benefits are in fact associated with the central concerns of the WTO: market access and clear rules allowing the developing countries to be effectively integrated in trade and investment flows, rather than isolating them from the opportunities they offer.

Today, we are inaugurating the Ministerial Conference that marks the half-way point on our path towards the conclusion of the Round. As well as taking stock of the situation we are now in, our task is to provide stimulus and direction to the work, in order to ensure that we meet the time-limit we set ourselves and the conditions we envisaged at Doha.

If we wish to stay on course, it is essential that we achieve concrete results at this Ministerial Conference. The last two years have shown that this is no easy task: we all face significant political costs that have hindered our efforts to narrow the gaps between our positions and reach agreement.

But at the same time, these two years have taught us that the only way to achieve a package acceptable to all is for every one of us to contribute to the process.

We have already begun to use such an approach: our recent agreement on the issue of access to medicines is proof that we are able to work together and conclude agreements in pursuit of a common objective.

On the other central issues that we are to resolve this week, our work must be imbued with the same spirit. The contribution required of us will vary from one Member to another, but the task involved will be equally difficult and complex:

- The developed countries must make a greater effort than hitherto towards more even competitive conditions in agricultural markets. Subsidies – domestic and export alike – and tariffs will have to be eliminated or substantially reduced if the developing countries are to benefit from the comparative advantages which they have in agricultural production but which the current market distortions are preventing them from exploiting, to the point of jeopardizing the existence of the rural population of the developing world.
- Agriculture is undoubtedly the core issue of the Doha Round. The results achieved in the other areas, for better or for worse, will depend to a large extent on what is achieved in the agricultural negotiations. The initiative of the Round accordingly falls, first and foremost, on those with most to do in agriculture.
- Another area where the greater effort rests with the developed countries is special and differential treatment. We have made progress on this issue in recent months, but need to consolidate that progress this week.
- I began with the efforts required of the developed countries. But this does not mean that they are to be the sole contributors. On the contrary, many of the potential benefits this Round offers developing countries derive from the liberalization of trade flows, particularly of industrial products, between the developing countries themselves. Here too, the lowering of tariff and non-tariff barriers will enable the comparative advantages of every Member of the WTO to be exploited.

In addition, the developed countries will obviously have to lower the tariffs – which are particularly high – that they impose on certain products of special interest to the developing countries.

Both for agriculture and for market access for non-agricultural products, the Ministerial Conference we are inaugurating today affords an unrepeatable opportunity to reach agreement on the main lines that our negotiations must follow in the future. It is our responsibility, in the next few days, to focus discussions on both issues and to lay the foundations for an ambitious and well-balanced final agreement.

If we succeed, it will be much easier to reach, as we must, a shared solution to the other major questions to be addressed by this Ministerial Conference: the four Singapore issues. Here, the aim of broadening and strengthening the system of multilateral trade rules vies with the idea that priority must be given to the central issues of the WTO. On none of these issues have we managed to agree on what is to be done; but I am confident that we can do so in the context of the broader package that is to be achieved in the next few days.

I am not of the view that these negotiations can be regarded as a conflict between North and South. It is simply a matter of each one of us doing the necessary work in the relevant area. Real leadership, in North and South alike, must betray real commitment to a stronger and more vigorous

multilateral system. This must be the concern of all our countries, whether rich or poor, large or small.

In conclusion, allow me to reiterate what I consider to be the most important principle that must govern the work we undertake this week: unqualified respect for the commitments that each one of us undertook in the Doha Declaration.

If we abide by that principle and address the task seriously and constructively, we will be in a position to achieve positive and tangible results this week.

The fate of the Doha Development Agenda is in our hands. We have the opportunity, which arises only once in a lifetime, to strengthen the system of trade rules and secure full participation by the developing countries in the benefits of international trade.

Let us seize this opportunity. Let us show, by actual deeds, that the solution to the problems of the poorest countries is to be found in liberalization and economic reform, and not in immobility and isolation. Let us make sure that the benefits of trade are brought within the reach of all, especially those that need them most. In a word, let us honour the promise we made in Doha.
