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TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Statement by the Honourable Mervyn Assam, Minister of Trade, Industry and Consumer Affairs

We are meeting on the eve of the 21st century, under the unfavourable glare of the public eye and of the world media, to determine the future structure of the international trading system.

It is undeniable that the multilateral trading system has contributed to economic growth, prosperity and development over the past 50 years. Nor should there be any doubt about the commitment of WTO Member countries and its developing country Members in particular, to a liberalized, fair and equitable rules-based world trading system.

This, the Third Session of the Ministerial Conference, provides us with the ideal opportunity to identify the WTO's strengths and shortcomings, addressing the latter with a view to strengthening the Organization and making it more responsive to the needs and concerns of its many constituents. That is precisely why the developing countries have insisted on a detailed examination of implementation of the individual Uruguay Round Agreements with a view to correcting existing imbalances and inequities.

It must be acknowledged that the developing countries have experienced problems and difficulties in their attempts to comply with their obligations and have not benefited as predicted from the Uruguay Round. This is especially true for the least developed countries, the small and vulnerable economies and countries in transition.

Although already overburdened by the commitments undertaken in the Uruguay Round, developing countries are now being urged to agree to a new round that would include new issues as well as the built-in agenda. Implementation issues are however, as important as agriculture and services. Therefore, in our view, the proposal to have implementation issues examined by a study group that will report to the Fourth Ministerial is unacceptable. What is needed is immediate adoption by this Conference of the recommendations aimed at resolving these implementation problems.

Very early in the preparatory process, the phrase "development round" was used to describe a possible new round of multilateral trade negotiations. However, today as we deal with the inability of Member countries in Geneva to reach consensus on a draft text for the Ministerial Declaration, the notion of a development round that would make the interests of the developing countries primordial seems to have fallen by the wayside. The intransigence of countries and their refusal to take account of the interests, concerns and problems of others is highly regrettable.

Apart from implementation and development, any new round must perforce look at WTO's methodologies and working procedures that militate against effective participation by developing countries.

As regards the inclusion of civil society, there is room for governments to facilitate information sharing, awareness building and debate on WTO issues at the national level. However, the direct participation of non-governmental organizations in the workings of this intergovernmental body may not be propitious as long as Member countries continue to experience difficulties in participating fully and effectively in the work and deliberations of the WTO.

It should be recalled that in the Geneva Declaration, Ministers renewed their commitment to ensure that the benefits of the multilateral trading system be extended as widely as possible, and expressed deep concern over the marginalization of least-developed countries and certain small economies.

As a small, island-developing economy, Trinidad and Tobago places particular emphasis and importance on the recognition within the WTO, as is the case with other international and intergovernmental organizations, of the peculiar problems, vulnerabilities and specificities of small economies. In this regard, it would be timely for the WTO to establish a work programme on small economies. The objective of this programme would be to assist the integration of these economies into the multilateral trading system.

Technical assistance and capacity-building activities are critical for facilitating the meaningful participation of small economies in the global economy. Effective market access for products and services produced by these small economies is a *sine qua non* for their development. We also must never forget the importance of technology transfer for the social and economic transformation of our countries.

The principle of operationalized special and differential treatment for developing countries must be acknowledged and implemented and in particular for small states that are disadvantaged by small market size, limited natural resources, lack of technologies and financial resources and vulnerability to natural disasters.

Furthermore, existing trade preferences between developed and developing countries to facilitate the phased and smooth integration of developing countries into the multilateral trading system must be maintained. Ministers should therefore support the granting of necessary waivers in favour of developing countries, which benefit from preferential market access and terms of trade.

Trinidad and Tobago is committed to the multilateral trading system. At the same time we are convinced that regional trade agreements strengthen the multilateral system rather than detract from it by enabling small countries to develop *inter alia* economies of scale, product quality, competitiveness and secure export markets.

In your opening comments you spoke convincingly of the need to leave Seattle with a Declaration that is balanced and reflective of the interests of all of the WTO Members. I too share your lofty and noble sentiment.
