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DON'T INTRODUCE NEW ISSUES INTO WTO, SAY G-15 NATIONS

By: Kuah Guan Oo

HAHARE, Nov 3 (Bernama) -- The group of 15 developing nations (G-15) began their three-day summit here today with a joint call to the developed countries not to introduce new issues into the World Trade Organisation during its ministerial meeting in Singapore next month.

Chairman of the grouping, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe in opening the summit, said they did not think it was prudent to burden the WTO with new issues while they were yet to implement in full the agreed ones.

"The strong arm tactics and the unrelenting pressure brought to bear on us confirm our suspicions that we are being frog-marched into internationally binding arrangements that will eventually entail the total surrender of national sovereignty," President Mugabe said.

Elaborating on the new international trade agenda, he said the focus of the WTO should be on improving the multilateral trading system, making it more equitable and balanced.

The sentiments of the Zimbabwe leader were also echoed by the other three speakers -- President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt who spoke on behalf of Africa, followed by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for Asia and Vice President Carlos Ruckauf of Argentina on behalf of Latin America and the Caribbean.

President Mubarak said the G-15 and other developing countries should speak out with a collective voice against any new issues at the WTO ministerial meeting.

Dr Ruckauf said the WTO ministerial meeting in Singapore must outline a working programme for the organisation reflecting in a balanced manner the interests of all member countries in the future evolution of the multilateral trade system.

The four leaders in their speeches, also spoke of the need to strengthen the G-15 grouping. President Mugabe, in noting that the implementation of various G-15 projects seemed to have lost momentum, said the continued existence of the grouping hinged, to a large extent on their ability to translate words into action.

"Indeed, national and collective precedence should be given to these projects," he said.

He also said that it was in the interests of all countries that a mutually beneficial multilateral trading system continued to develop. In practical terms, this partnership would entail the strengthening of inter-governmental cooperation between developed and developing countries and more effective coordination of multilateral institutions.

"It is now left to us, as the G-15, in tandem with other developing countries, to map out strategies that would bring about an effective dialogue between the North and the South."

In this regard, President Mugabe said, the G-15 practice that requires the current G-15 chairman to send messages to the Group of 7 (G-7) needs to be reconsidered.

He said they did not subscribe to the view that, with the end of the Cold War, the North-South optique, with regards to international issues, had become redundant.

After the opening ceremony, the leaders later held their plenary sessions. They later visited the Zimbabwe Trade exhibition and tonight attended a dinner hosted by President Mugabe.

They would depart for Victoria Falls tomorrow for their retreat and return to Harare for the closing ceremony on Wednesday.

Of the 15 countries, five are represented by their heads of state/government; they are President Mubarak, Prime Minister Deve Gowda of India, Prime Minister J. Patterson of Jamaica, Dr Mahathir and President Mugabe.

Three who are representatives of their heads of state/government are Prime Minister Ahmad Ouyohia of Algeria, Dr Ruckauf and Prime Minister Habib Thiam of Senegal.

Dr Ruckauf, when speaking as the spokesman for Latin America and the Caribbean said due to the coinciding of dates with the Ibero-American summit requiring their presence, President Carlos Menem of Argentina and the other leaders of the region were unable to attend the G-15 summit.

Chile is represented by the personal representative Jorge Berguno; Indonesia by Foreign Minister Ali Alatas; Venezuela by special envoy Werner Corrales; Mexico by Foreign Minister Jose Gurria. While Nigeria and Peru are represented by representatives, Brazil is reported represented by Vice President Marco Marciel. -- BERNAMA

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