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WTO SEEKS HIGH PROFILE 50TH ANNIVERSARY IN 1998

By: Jeffri Rafiee

SINGAPORE, Dec 9 (Bernama) -- The first biennial World Trade Organisation (WTO) Ministerial Conference just started today and its director general Renato Ruggiero is already hoping for a high-profile celebration of the 50th anniversary of the multilateral trading system at the beginning of 1998.

"It would be a unique occasion not just to celebrate one of the major international success stories of our time, but also to look ahead into the fast-moving prospects of the new century," he said at the conference here today.

The multilateral trading system began in 1948 with the inception of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in Geneva. Since then, world trade grew 16-fold and is forecasted to increase to 22-fold by 1998.

Ruggiero said the inaugural Ministerial Conference here opened a new important chapter of economic history after the completion of the Uruguay Round.

Speaking on the WTO, he said the unity of industrialised, developing, least-developed and transition economies was the most valuable asset of the organisation of some 128 countries.

He noted, however, the unity was still a fragile one and needed to be strengthened through reaching agreement on issues that were still outstanding in terms of the Ministerial Declaration.

"Though they (the outstanding issues) are few in number, their political sensitivity is undeniable," he said.

Acting United States Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky said if the WTO could succeed in negotiations on information technology, basic telecommunications services and financial services, it could build the infrastructure for a more interconnected global economy of the 21st century.

Stressing the rapid technological change, she said: "We salute the foresight of Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr.) Mahathir Mohamed for his vision to establish the Multimedia Super Corridor plan that will lead to an Information Technology city of 100,000 inhabitants as well as the creation of the world's first paperless national government by the year 2000."

The Information Technology Agreement (ITA) would be the first concrete demonstration of the WTO's ability to move forward, she added.

On the proposed broadening of the WTO agenda, Barshefsky said the United States was "willing to go along with others who wish to begin a modest work programme in the areas of investment and competition."

She also said that WTO should, "in cooperation with the International Labour Organisation, examine in greater detail the important nexus between trade and labour standards."

"We believe strongly that increased trade and the economic growth that it brings should also engender greater respect for the basic rights which are the focus of our core labour standards proposal," she added.

European Commission vice-president Leon Brittan spoke on the implementation of obligations which he said "has gone surprisingly well."

The dispute settlement system had lived up to expectations in providing an effective basis for a peaceful resolution of disputes, he said.

He also said the European Union (EU) was ready to make commitments to open further its market to imports from all least developed countries.

The EU would also study the different options advanced in the plan of

action.

"We want to define in a coordinated way, in the WTO, concrete contributions by all involved for early implementation," Brittan said and called on WTO members to make similar pledge.

Looking ahead, he said, the WTO must make financial services a permanent part of its disciplines and pick up new subjects like investment and competition.

On environment protection and labour standards, he said: "The results of the WTO's work to-date fall short of our expectations. WTO's credibility is at stake, and there is much to do.

"The language emerging so far on trade and labour standards respects the concerns of those who are worried that discussion of this subject could be a cloak for protectionism. We share the desire to ensure that, that should not and will not happen." -- BERNAMA

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