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Chance for developing countries to take stronger stand on world trade

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FOR a week, beginning Saturday, Bangkok will be very much in the news as it hosts the 10th United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (Unctad) summit.

The gathering is being billed as the first big meeting on trade since the World Trade Organisation's Ministerial Meeting in Seattle last November collapsed in violent protests.

High on the agenda of the meeting will be issues covering the future of globalisation and trade liberalisation.

Economic decision-makers, from developed and developing countries, will be involved in debates on how to get trade liberalisation revitalised after the failure in Seattle.

Among those who will be attending are World Bank president James Wolfensohn and outgoing International Monetary Fund managing director Michel Camdessus.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who will be leading the Malaysian delegation, will raise the concerns of developing countries on the effects of globalisation.

Unctad promotes trade as a tool for development in poor nations and does not negotiate or enforce trade pacts like the WTO.

It is often viewed as the only global forum where developing nations can make their voices heard as their aspirations are close to the body's mandate.

Unctad secretary-general Rubens Ricuperro said the meeting would offer governments a timely opportunity for an orderly debate, in a non-confrontational climate, on solutions to the problems created by globalisation.

The meeting is viewed by developing countries as an important step in their campaign for a stronger voice in world trade.

The dissatisfaction over the stance of the four big powers - the United States, Japan, the European Union and Canada - on some key issues was the main reason the Seattle meeting was marred by anti-globalisation protests.

With the failure of the WTO meeting, plans to launch the so-called "Millennium Round" of global trade talks were also ruined.

Anti-WTO protesters have accused the body of destroying the environment and workers' rights.

The non-governmental organisations claimed that new trade deals were being drafted without earlier or more input from trade unions, environmentalists and others who would be affected by them.

They said that developed nations failed to listen to the voices of poor nations in trade-making decisions which were affecting their lives.

Already, organisers of the Unctad conference are preparing for Seattle-type riots with Thai police gearing its biggest-ever security operation to protect delegations.

Realising that the voices of NGOs are important and should be heard, organisers of the Bangkok meeting have pledged to sit down with anti-globalisation groups to get their input on shaping trade in the globalised era.

The NGOs had urged the Unctad delegations to break down trade barriers between developed and developing nations.

They also want the body to play a major role in revamping the world financial system, which is weighted in favour of rich countries.

However, the absence of leaders of developed countries, notably the US, at the meeting could hamper efforts to remodel the global trading and economic system.

As officials hope that some trade disputes which hurt the WTO in Seattle will be addressed in Bangkok, developing countries have to assert their stance in influencing the way business is done.

They have to come together and determine that the next round of global trade talks will not put them at the mercy of the rich countries.

Hopefully, threats of demonstrations and street protests will not derail them from achieving this mission.

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