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Difficult task for ministers to overcome differences

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THE world's trade ministers, gathered in Qatar's capital city of Doha for the fourth ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), have a difficult task in determining the future of world trade with differences still prevailing between the developed and developing countries.

While both sides continue to discuss and debate their differences and the need for a clear and precise agenda for a new round of world trade talks, the one bright spot will be the accession of China to the world body.

It took 15 long and difficult years of negotiations for China to win approval for its entry to the WTO. The protocol for its entry is scheduled to be signed today. China's chief negotiator Long Yongtu describes China's entry as "a historic moment".

But even so the failure of the Seattle talks in 1999 and the attacks of Sept 11 loom large as ministers from 142 contracting parties of the WTO gather for their biennial meeting.

In addition to member countries others attending include 39 observer governments and 74 international inter-governmental organisations.

At the general council meeting that was held from Oct 31-Nov 1, only a "few members" expressed full satisfaction with the draft text of the Ministerial Declaration.

The revised draft Ministerial Declaration, which many developing countries say is still "unbalanced and biased" has been submitted to the chairman of the fourth ministerial meeting, Yousef Hussain Kamal, Qatar's Minister of Finance, Economy and Commerce.

The chairman of the Governing Council, Styart Harbinson of Hong Kong, and WTO's director-general Mike Moore, in their covering note to the draft declaration admit that "the distance between positions in some critical areas remain significant".

A delegate from a developing country says that the cover note "glosses over the differences" without explaining them.

Moore and Harbinson are transmitting the "texts to Ministers on our responsibility" saying that the "texts clearly do not purport to represent agreed elements in any way at this stage".

Malaysia had told the meeting in Geneva that the "draft needs to address an inherent imbalance, generally and specifically". The text tends to focus on new and untried issues and sets aside the "more current and all important" matters that the WTO needs to really address.

Developing countries want the "unfinished business" from the Uruguay Round such as the implementation and mandated negotiations and reviews to be dealt with first.

But measured against the "elements relating to the new issues, it is difficult to be convinced that the concerns of developing countries are being taken care of".

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has maintained that it is not against the launch of a new round of world trade talks but stressed that there is a need to fix a "very clear and precise agenda...we want to ensure that it is about trade and trade-related".

India's Minister of Commerce and Industry, Murasoli Maran, said in Doha that a new round of trade talks without resolving some of the outstanding issues would lead to an intolerable situation for the world's majority of people.

India, one of the most vocal among developing countries, does not believe that WTO is a democratic or transparent body. It says that developing countries which form the majority of WTO members, have virtually no say in the formulation of the agenda.

The draft ministerial declaration submitted to the chairman of the meeting is said to represent nearly 75 per cent of the US views and the balance that of the European Union.

And the chairman's letter does not mention the differences of opinion raised by member countries.

With the final touches being put to the opening of the ministerial meeting, security concerns have been heightened following attacks at a Qatari airbase which have been described as "an isolated incident". The gunman, Abdullah Mubarak Tashal al-Hajiri, who according to Qatari media reports, was "mentally unstable" was shot dead.

Security is extremely tight around the venue and hotels where delegates are housed.

It was reported that the US has held its own security briefings for its delegation including "evacuation procedures". The size of the delegation is said to have been reduced.

Qatari authorities are also on alert for any demonstrators bearing in mind the activities of anti-globalisation demonstrators in Seattle and at Genoa where one demonstrator was killed.

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