

14 AUG 2003

MAHATHIR-WTO

MAHATHIR HAPPY WITH EZULWINI STATEMENT ON WTO

By: Mikhail Raj Abdullah

MBABANE, (Swaziland) Aug 14 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has expressed satisfaction with the draft of the "Ezulwini Statement" to be sent to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Ministerial Meeting in Cancun, Mexico next month, which will contain a unified call to protect Third World interests during trade negotiations.

Tan Sri Omar Abdul Rahman, chairman of the Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Development (CPTM), said that Dr Mahathir told several leaders of the Third World that he was "happy" with the "Ezulwini Statement" during the opening deliberations at the Global 2003 Smart Partnership Dialogue near here Thursday morning.

Briefing Malaysian journalists on the outcome of the interactive breakfast session between heads of government mostly from Africa, Dr Omar said that while leaders were generally happy with the statement, it was still being fine-tuned before being issued as a separate statement probably Friday.

Among the leaders who participated in the interactive breakfast sessions included South Africa's Vice-President, Jacob Zuma, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, Botswana President Festus G. Mogae, Mozambique's President Joaquim Chissano, Sudan's President, Gen Omar Hassa Ahmad Al-Bashir, Namibian President Sam Nujoma and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni.

King Mswati III of Swaziland is playing host to this year's edition of the Southern African International Dialogue.

Dr Omar said that while the participating countries at the smart partnership dialogue took no individual interests with the WTO, the "Ezulwini Statement" would represent a unified stand and a stronger voice in promoting the interests of developing economies, especially those pertaining to agriculture and pharmaceuticals.

Trade officials from developing countries have expressed concern that developed countries might renege on their commitments to liberalise trade in areas vital to Third World countries.

King Mswati, in opening the dialogue Wednesday night, highlighted the importance of the "Ezulwini Statement" in promoting Third World interests collectively and that a joint statement by participating heads of government from Swaziland would have more clout.

There has been concern that the US and European Union, might backtrack on their commitments made at the last WTO meeting in Doha, to enable cheaper drugs to be made in Africa and cutting down on farm subsidies.

Some officials at the dialogue had privately expressed fears that the Cancun WTO Ministerial Meeting which begins on Sept 10 was going to collapse.

Reports described the US and Europe as having taken a very hard stand on some negotiating issues such as the production and manufacture of cheap drugs to combat HIV-AIDS in Africa.

In Swaziland, with a population of 1.2 million, about one in every four to five persons is infected with the HIV-AIDS virus, while in Uganda, it reached chronic proportions a few years ago.

Many of these countries are hard-pressed to fight the AIDS scourge because drugs to treat those infected are expensive.

Cheaper drugs would make their fight against AIDS that much easier.

Although the US and Europe agreed at the Doha ministerial meeting to

allow African countries to produce these badly-needed drugs cheaply, they were now backtracking on their Doha commitments, coming under pressure from powerful pharmaceutical lobbies.

They are now insisting African and developing countries to buy the expensive drugs, something impossible simply because impoverished Africans just cannot afford it.

"The US and Europe are backtracking and people are dying here," an official who requested anonymity said.

Even in the sensitive area of agriculture, both the US and Europe were increasing their subsidies to farmers, thus making it impossible for African farmers to compete on an equitable manner with heavily-subsidised American and European farm products. -- BERNAMA

MR FR