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Global trade talks very much alive, says Supachai

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SUGGESTIONS that the Cancun's global trade talks was a failure is actually being exaggerated, World Trade Organisation (WTO) director-general Dr Supachai Panichpakdi said.

In fact, he said trade negotiations after the Cancun talks were very much alive and kicking, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) Summit was an opportune time for economic leaders to discuss the issues and give the right kind of signal to the world.

"The summit can offer the opportunities for key leaders to discuss policies concerning the sea of uncertainties. It is the first trade forum to be discussed, a month after the WTO ministerial talks in Cancun.

"I am interested to see the discussion here and hope this will point to the essential direction for future trade negotiations," he told participants of the Apec CEO Summit at the Shangri-La Hotel yesterday.

The four-day Apec CEO Summit, which ends tomorrow, is being held on the sidelines of the Apec Summit. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will deliver a keynote speech at the Apec CEO Summit today.

Supachai said WTO members, including Apec member countries, need to get down to a real business discussion and go back to the drawing board after the Cancun talks.

"But, we should not start from square one. We need to pick up from where we left off at the Cancun talks. We must translate the political will into action which is flexibility, especially on the Singapore issues, the one single issue that caused the breakdown of negotiations in Cancun," he said.

The Singapore issues, which comprise issues on investment and competition, transparency in Government procurement and trade facilitation were brought up during the WTO ministerial meeting in Singapore in 1996.

"After Cancun, we need to be more flexible and I have already seen some flexibility, particularly on the Singapore issues.

"I deem it useful and a great help if the signal emerging from the Apec Summit points to us to focus on key issues and work out from the text produced in Cancun. And from this, I am sure that we can go off to the final road map for the success of the trade rounds," Supachai said.

He said the Apec goals could be synchronised with the WTO for the success of the multilateral round of trade talks.

While noting the alarming concerns on conflicts in the negotiations ahead, Supachai stressed that the trade talks must not fail.

He said WTO senior officials would meet in Geneva on Dec 15 to deliberate further on four main issues - agriculture, manufacturing, the Singapore issues and cotton.

Earlier, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra called on the private sector of Apec countries to play the leading role in stimulating the economies of their respective countries.

"The making of an economy is not a job of a government. Only the direction and facilitation of it are."

In this regard, he urged the business community to send a loud and clear message to the Apec economic leaders that they believe in the Apec process and that they are willing to provide creative solutions.