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BENIN

Statement by H.E. Mr Fatiou Vibotgbé Akplogan
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On behalf of the Government of Benin and in my own name I would like to express my sincere thanks and warm congratulations to the people and authorities of Mexico for the excellent preparation of this Conference, the warm welcome extended to us since we arrived in this vast and beautiful country and the special attention we have received.

Before commencing my statement, I should like to convey my sincere condolences to the Swedish delegation at this Conference and, through it, to the Government of Sweden, the Swedish people and the family of the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs assassinated yesterday, Thursday, 11 September 2003.

While sharing the pain felt by the Swedish people at this time, it is appropriate to recognize the enormous efforts which people desirous of peace throughout the world must continue to make in order to maintain the climate of peace essential for the development of our countries.

Today is 12 September and the tragic event that affected the American people and the world as a whole two years ago as a result of the same scourge of terrorism is still in our minds. We must all act individually and collectively so that we never again experience such tragic events.

The work at this Conference is of vital importance to my delegation and to all developing and least-developed countries.

Coming immediately after the Doha meeting, which incorporated the development dimension into the ongoing trade negotiations, we are justified in expecting results that measure up to the challenges facing us in view of the manifold vital needs of the populations on whose behalf we are negotiating.

The issues to be covered in the various areas of negotiation such as the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health, agriculture, market access for non-agricultural products, services, Special and Differential treatment, implementation issues, issues specific to least-developed countries, technical cooperation, the sectoral initiative on cotton, the commodities situation, and the discussions that we will have on other issues such as those of Singapore, must be conducted taking due account of the special situation of developing countries, and particularly the least-developed among them.

I would like to dwell on some issues, although this does not mean that others are not of interest to my country.

Agriculture is deemed to be the backbone of the economy in developing countries and accounts for around 40 per cent of the GDP, provides over 60 per cent of export earnings, and employs some 70 per cent of the working population.

Paradoxically, however, this sector is still facing constraints and there are many imbalances in the participation of developing and least-developed countries in international trade in commodities.

It is quite obvious that agricultural exports from these countries to developed countries come up against obstacles such as the high level of tariffs, tariff escalation, non-tariff obstacles, massive production and export subsidies for certain products.

A marked improvement in international trade rules is essential to allow effective and efficient participation by developing countries in international agricultural trade, particularly by the least-developed countries.

This is why the commitments we undertook on agriculture, included in paragraphs 13 and 14 of the Doha Declaration, should be implemented.

You will allow me to recall that these concern improvements in market access, substantial reductions of, with a view to phasing out, export subsidies and trade-distorting domestic support.

Looking at the vital question of export subsidies from another angle, I should like to lay special emphasis on the subsidies given for the production and export of cotton by some Members of our Organization.

This trade practice is contrary to the rules and principles governing multilateral trade, is prejudicial to least-developed countries that produce and export cotton and has harmful effects on their economy and on social conditions in the communities producing cotton in these vulnerable countries, which are increasingly marginalized.

This is why it is urgent to find a solution to this problem, which is to be discussed by the Conference under Agenda Item 2, with a view to adopting a relevant decision for which a draft has already been put before the meeting. We hope that we will achieve this result, awaited by several million people, through solidarity, a sense of fairness, and the constant support which a large number of Members of our Organization have unceasingly given us on this issue. I should like to thank them all.

There has been a positive step forward in the current Round of trade negotiations in recent days with the adoption of the Decision implementing paragraph 6 of the Doha Declaration on TRIPS and public health.

This is a major achievement in the search for a multilateral solution to the serious public health problems in developing countries which do not have access to essential medicines or whose capacity to produce such medicines is insufficient.

Through this Decision, we have confirmed that people remain the most important economic factor and should be placed at the centre of development in order to promote economic growth and social well-being.

Other aspects of the Agreement nevertheless still warrant our attention. Special emphasis in this regard should be laid on the need to ensure that the TRIPS Agreement is consistent with the provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity and those of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

The right of local populations to their traditional knowledge and know-how, traditional genetic natural resources and the products derived from genetic selection on their land must be recognized and protected.

In another area, developing and least-developed countries point out that access for their non-agricultural products could be boosted if the necessary arrangements and flexibility existed. It is mainly a question of making a genuine effort to tackle the problems of tariff peaks and tariff escalation by significantly lowering tariffs.

As regards trade in services, my delegation, together with those of several other developing and least-developed countries, recognize the advantages afforded by enhancing the legal and regulatory framework and basic infrastructure in the area of services.

They emphasize that, to give these activities a real boost, they should be given the technical assistance envisaged under the relevant provisions of the General Agreement on Trade in Services in relation to capacity-building. My country also draws attention to:

- (1) The need for developed countries to take practical measures to facilitate recognition of the qualifications of service suppliers from least-developed countries and their accession to mutual recognition agreements;
- (2) the need to ensure investment and transfer of technology suitable for building national capacity in the services sector so as to promote the competitiveness of export services in the least-developed countries.

The special and differential treatment for developing countries, as agreed in paragraph 44 of the Doha Declaration, should in fact be considered a cross-cutting issue. According to this Mandate, the rules and principles applicable to these countries should be made operational, precise and effective, and should take into account the particular needs and special situation of these countries.

With regard to the Singapore Issues, my delegation wishes to emphasize that Benin endorses the common position adopted by countries of the African Group, the Group of Least-Developed Countries and the ACP Group regarding the need to pursue the process of clarifying these issues in a spirit of caution so that the interests of developing countries are protected.

Before concluding, I should like to express my warm congratulations to Cambodia and Nepal, two members of the Group of Least-Developed Countries which have just joined our Organization.

Mr Chairman, we hope that the decisions we will take during this Conference will allow us to lay down the base for more just and more equitable international trade.

The delegation of Benin is firmly convinced that the Fifth Ministerial Conference will adopt decisions and approaches that are beneficial to all Member countries, paying particular attention to the special needs of least-developed countries, so that the poverty reduction strategies under way in our countries yield tangible results that lead to a real economic breakthrough.
