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## **INTER-AGENCY TRADE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME LAUNCHED FOR LEAST-DEVELOPED COUNTRIES**

A High-Level Meeting of six inter-governmental agencies, trade ministers from 38 least-developed countries (LDCs) and delegates from other WTO and UNCTAD member governments endorsed a trade assistance programme designed to help LDCs increase their ability to trade.

Key elements of the two-day meeting, which concluded on 28 October, included announcements of existing or improved preferential market access measures for LDCs by 19 developing and developed countries<sup>1</sup> and debates on building trade capacity and encouraging investment in least-developed countries. One WTO member, Hong Kong (China), said it will donate USD 1.25 million to the WTO's trust fund for technical assistance.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Renato Ruggiero, Director-General of the WTO said: "I am confident that the results of this meeting will live up to all our expectations that trade - and the multilateral trading system - can deliver concrete results to those countries which are at present most in need of our collective support, but which I ardently hope will be counted among the most dynamic trading nations of the 21st century". He also underlined the importance of information technology and the need for trade officials from LDCs to have the necessary computer infrastructure so that they could access key electronic information websites at the WTO in Geneva and elsewhere.

In his report of the meeting, H.E. Mr. Jan Pronk, Minister of Development Cooperation, (the Netherlands) and Chairman of the High-Level Meeting on Integrated Initiatives for Least-Developed Countries' Trade Development, said: "From consultations held both before and during the High-Level Meeting with a great number of participants, as well as from the discussions in the two thematic roundtables, I note that there is wide support for the content of the recommendations made. I therefore take it that participants would expect me to request the WTO Secretariat to convey these recommendations for consideration to the appropriate inter-governmental organization as well as to the governments of the least-developed countries and their development and trading partners."

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<sup>1</sup>Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Egypt, European Communities, Hungary, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Mauritius, Morocco, Norway, Singapore, South Africa, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey and the United States.



During the meeting, 12 countries - Bangladesh, Chad, Djibouti, Guinea, Haiti, Madagascar, Mali, Nepal, Tanzania, Uganda, Vanuatu and Zambia - were the focus of separate roundtable sessions in which the respective trade Ministers presented their needs for trade-related technical assistance to the six intergovernmental agencies involved in the meeting. The agencies, the International Monetary Fund, the International Trade Centre, the UN Development Programme, the UN Conference on Trade and Development, the World Bank and the WTO proposed programmes of technical assistance each agency would provide to the country concerned.

The 12 roundtable sessions are pilot cases and represent a first step in applying an integrated framework approach for trade-related technical assistance to a group of 21 other least-developed countries which have asked to participate in the "Integrated Framework for Trade-related Technical Assistance". The six inter-governmental agencies are to review the needs assessments of these countries by 15 March 1998 and provide them with a programme of technical assistance activities. The Director-General of the WTO was asked to prepare by May 1998, the time of the next WTO Ministerial Conference in Geneva, a full report on the outcome and follow-up of the meeting and announcements of implementation of the autonomous market access measures and commitments in favour of LDCs.

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