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MAURITIUS

Statement by the Honourable Rajkeshwar Purryag
Minister of Economic Planning, Information
and Telecommunications

I wish to join other delegations in commending the Singapore authorities for hosting, in such an excellent manner, this first Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization. Allow me also, Mr. Chairman, to congratulate you on your assumption of office and to assure you of my delegation's support in your enviable task.

The run-up to this first Ministerial Conference has not been without difficulties. The varying levels of development of WTO Members and the various economic interests at play in a rule-based body like the WTO make such a situation almost unavoidable.

We recognize that the Uruguay Round has resulted in greater trade liberalization and a strengthening of the multilateral trading system. All Members of the WTO are aware that the process of liberalization should benefit all of us. However, developing nations have in general benefited very little from globalization so far. This is a matter of concern as the very foundation of political and social development in our countries rests on sustained economic growth and a rise in the standard of living. It is in the spirit that we welcome the WTO/UNCTAD initiative for Africa and the WTO Plan for least developed countries both of which aim at improving the participation of developing countries in the world economy.

These initiatives require the mobilization of adequate financial resources if they are to be successfully implemented and give the expected results. The international community must, therefore, harmonize its approach and pool resources for the realization of these initiatives. A right step in this direction is the Donors' Meeting on the least developed, landlocked and island States scheduled for next year and in which we urge all countries to participate.

We are firmly convinced that regional trade arrangements have an essential role to play in furthering the process of gradual integration of the developing economies in the global system. I wish to make reference to two positive examples of regional cooperation. The first is the SADC Trade Protocol recently concluded by 12 countries of Southern Africa and which aims at establishing a free-trade area within a period of eight years.

We have no grounds to believe that there is contradiction between the multilateral system and regional agreements. In fact, the latter provides the breathing space for developing countries to adapt and adjust themselves to a competitive environment. Far from being an obstacle to multilateralism, regional agreements will in due course necessarily act as springboards for meaningful access to the global economy.

The second example of regionalism is the ACP/EU Convention which is recognized as a model of North-South cooperation covering not only trade but also many other sectors of vital importance to the ACP group of countries.

Indeed, the framework provided by the Lomé Convention goes a long way in preventing marginalization that may arise out of trade liberalization.

Most countries of the African, Caribbean and Pacific group of countries (ACP) are geographically isolated having small and vulnerable economies. Their share in world trade is insignificant and their trading arrangements can hardly influence international trade. A further erosion of the preferential trade regime under which the ACP currently operates would deny them the resources required to avail themselves of the opportunities created by the new economic order. In view of the constraints inherent to the ACP, it is our conviction that the Lomé preferences should be extended beyond the year 2000. While we are trying to find the most appropriate ways and means of rendering the Lomé Convention WTO-friendly, we would like to request Member countries to show flexibility and understanding in their consideration of such regional trade arrangements.

In this particular regard, I fully share the views expressed by the Honourable Prime Minister of Singapore in his speech and I quote: "The developing countries must be given time to adjust to the changes brought about by the Uruguay Round, both in terms of rules and the pressure of market opening measures."

We in Mauritius also recognize the need for developing countries to enhance the enabling environment for our private sector to operate more effectively and become more competitive to meet new challenges. Studies need to be undertaken in our respective countries to improve the operations of the private sector and to facilitate the smooth integration of private enterprises in the rapidly evolving world trading environment.

Let me assure you that my country as a founder Member of the WTO firmly believes in the basic principles of the Uruguay Round Agreement. We, along with other developing countries did make commitments in the Uruguay Round on the understanding that the Agreements reached would be implemented in its entirety and that there would be no attempt to alter fundamental principles and agreed time-frames. These commitments represent considerable efforts on our part and have a significant impact on our economic and domestic policies. Compliance with our obligations can only be effective with the full support of the trade unions, the private sector and the nation at large. Our countrymen will no longer have faith in future international agreements of this dimension if the Marrakesh Agreement is not strictly adhered to.

The Uruguay Round Agreement contains a multiplicity of obligations - notification requirements and other changes to existing national legislations, regulations and administrative procedures. This inevitably puts pressure on our limited resources. It is unfortunate that technical assistance in these highly specialized fields has not always been readily forthcoming. However, we are comforted by the offers made by several Members, including the host country in this regard.

We hope that this Conference will formulate clear directives for extending assistance in the implementation of the provisions of the Uruguay Round Agreements.

The Singapore Conference has an important mission to fulfil. It must give a fillip to the integration of our developing countries in the globalization of world trade. I would like here to refer specifically to the support which needs to be provided to the net food-importing countries.

We have yet to complete the unfinished business and to address the issues pertaining to the built-in agenda of the Uruguay Round. You will agree that in such circumstances it would be difficult to give due consideration to the host of new issues being proposed by Members, the more so when it is felt that many of these can best be addressed in other appropriate recognized fora. A case in point is the issue of labour standards which should be dealt with under the aegis of the ILO. My country, which has a long tradition of industrial democracy, has always complied with the rules of the ILO. High labour standards are maintained through a continuous process of tripartite negotiations. Mr. Chairman, you may wish to note that my delegation comprises representatives of both the trade unions and the private sector.

The WTO is at a crossroads. Our credibility and the success of our endeavour depend on the capacity to ensure that the multilateral trading system does not result in the marginalization of our economies. A cautious and phased approach which recognizes the specificities of all countries will undoubtedly enable us to fully avail ourselves of the opportunities coming our way.

The ideals of democracy, good governance, human rights, and above all, the rule of law are the foundations of our domestic and foreign policy. We therefore expect that the Singapore Conference meets our aspirations. This meeting is a golden opportunity to put aside our differences. We need to build up consensus. Posterity will hold us to task if we do not achieve this mission.