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**MEETING OF MINISTERS FROM 29 LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES
IN WTO IN PREPARATION FOR SINGAPORE**

13 to 15 November 1996

"How can the world's poorest countries rise up to become full partners in the global economy and how to connect these countries with the express train we call globalization?", asked Mr. Renato Ruggiero, Director General of the WTO in addressing Ministers and high-rank policy officials of 29 Least Developed Countries in the WTO, on Friday 15 November.

The three day meeting was organized by the WTO Secretariat, with the financial support of the governments of Norway, Korea and the Czech Republic. Its main objective was to assist Ministers from Least Developed Countries to better appreciate the WTO, its objectives and functions, assessing the importance of a strengthened role in the multilateral trading system as well as discussing the requirements and opportunities arising from the new trading environment.

Addressing the audience, Mr. Renato Ruggiero emphasized three immediate priorities for the future :

- to assist Least Developed Countries in finding a stronger voice in the WTO and using the system more, as developing countries already do ;
- to use new technologies to widen trade knowledge and expertise and "to help your policy makers and traders become more aware of opportunities in the global system, and better equipped to seize them". The development of new technologies of information would also "open up new exciting possibilities for tapping into the potential of the developing world's most precious asset - its people".
- to further develop collaboration between multilateral institutions in programmes of technical assistance. The WTO and UNCTAD, with the International Trade Center, have already taken some important steps in favour of Least Developed Countries. "This kind of collaboration is a good start, but we need to work closely with all other relevant organizations - whether in the United Nations system, the Bretton Woods organizations, or the various regional bodies - to ensure that the resources and expertise of the international community remain focused, coordinated and relevant to the most pressing needs. More important, our collaboration has to be directed towards a larger goal or vision".

Mr. Rubens Ricupero, Secretary General of UNCTAD, spoke on the participation of Least Developed Countries (LLDCs) in the multilateral trading system and the promotion of equitable development. Mr Ricupero urged common and coordinated efforts of all donors, including international organizations and advanced developing countries.

"Bilateral and multilateral support would be invaluable for programmes to reduce Developing Countries' debt stock, improve physical infrastructure and social services necessary to "crowd-in" private investment, strengthen technological capabilities and improve local skills, increase market access for LLDCs, promote regional cooperation, and enhance negotiating capacities of LLDCs to enable them to participate effectively in future trade negotiations at the WTO as well as to articulate their development priorities and safeguard their trading interests within the framework of the multilateral trading system".

The meeting covered aspects relating to trade and development under the Uruguay Round Agreements and scope for supportive policy formulation to assist Least Developed Countries to overcome supply-side blockages and to make full use of trade opportunities available. Special attention was given to multilateral technical cooperation that can be provided through the WTO.

The meeting also tried to assist and facilitate advance preparation to ensure effective participation in the forthcoming WTO Ministerial Conference in Singapore in December 1996. Some of the main issues that are included in its agenda were specifically addressed. The participation of Ministers of Least Developed Countries in the Singapore Ministerial Conference (SMC) is essential as WTO Members will take full stock of the operation of the multilateral trading system, address issues regarding implementation and determine the future course of activities in the WTO.

The participation at the SMC by Ministers and accompanying senior officials from WTO LLDC Members will be made possible through a special fund that has been put together for this purpose from generous financial contributions committed by the European Union, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Australia and Singapore. In addition, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Germany) is providing financial assistance to facilitate journalists coming from least developed and some other developing countries to attend and report on the Ministerial Meeting.

The meeting was opened by H.E. Mr. William Rossier, the Chairman of the General Council of the WTO. It included keynote speeches by H.E. Mr. Alec Erwin, Minister for Trade and Industry of South Africa, H.E. Mr. Tofael Ahmed, Minister for Commerce and Industry of Bangladesh, H.E. Mrs. Kari Nordheim-Larsen, Minister for Development Cooperation of Norway, H.E. Mr Nacer Benjelloun-Touimi, Chairman of the Committee on Trade and Development.

All speeches are available in the WTO Secretariat.

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