

# WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION

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## Committee on Regional Trade Agreements Thirty-Sixth Session

### NOTE ON THE MEETING OF 29-30 MARCH 2004

Chairmen: Mr. J. Meetoo (Mauritius) and Mr. R. Saborío Soto (Costa Rica)

#### A. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

1. The Thirty-Sixth Session of the Committee on Regional Trade Agreements (CRTA) was convened in Airgram WTO/AIR/2276/Rev.1, dated 19 March. An annotated draft agenda had been distributed in January 2004.

2. The Chairman announced that he would raise the question of the work programme for the next session of the CRTA under "Other Business".

3. The following Agenda was adopted:

- A. Adoption of the Agenda
- B. Election of Officers
- C. Examination of Regional Trade Agreements
  - I. Status Report on the Examination Work
  - II. European Community – Croatia Interim Agreement
  - III. European Communities – Jordan Euro-Mediterranean Agreement
  - IV. Free Trade Area between the United States and Jordan, Goods and Services
  - V. Free Trade Agreement between the EFTA States and Mexico
  - VI. Free Trade Agreement between Chile and Mexico, Goods and Services
  - VII. Free Trade Agreement between Israel and Mexico
  - VIII. European Communities – Bulgaria Europe Agreement, Services
  - IX. European Communities – Czech Republic Europe Agreement, Services
  - X. European Communities – Romania Europe Agreement, Services
- D. Other Business

4. The Chairman recalled that the Latin American Integration Association (LAIA) had been granted observer status to the CRTA on an *ad hoc* basis and sought confirmation to extend an invitation to LAIA to attend the Committee's next meeting. It was so agreed.

#### B. ELECTION OF OFFICERS

5. The Chairman proposed that the Committee elect, by acclamation, Ambassador Ronald Saborío Soto, from Costa Rica, as the Chairman of the CRTA. It was so agreed.

6. The outgoing Chairman thanked the Committee and the Secretariat for their help and support during the year 2003. In particular, he had appreciated Members' active participation and guidance during his chairmanship, which had allowed him to learn a lot on the question of regional trade agreements (RTAs).

7. The newly elected Chairman thanked his predecessor, Ambassador Meetoo, for the very good work he had accomplished during the past year and wished him success in his Chairmanship of the Working Group on Trade and Transfer of Technology. He thanked delegations for having elected him for this task. The results of the CRTA's work had been limited, and a significant amount of work remained to be done in order to achieve the objectives set out at the time of the establishment of the Committee some years ago. He was however convinced that Members were willing to put an end to the blockages faced by the CRTA. The DDA negotiations on disciplines and procedures applying to RTAs had recently restarted, and it would seem that Members were committed to achieve a rapid progress on a new "RTAs' Transparency" package that would help in revitalizing the CRTA's work. In that context, he invited Members to cooperate in advancing the work of the Negotiating Group on Rules. He also stressed that transparency in the CRTA could be improved even within the framework of current rules and procedures; he urged Members to abide by the deadlines for the submission of information and to be as transparent and comprehensive as possible in the provision of the needed information, so as to allow the Committee to discharge its work in a meaningful manner. Finally, he informed the Committee that Ambassador Weston from Trinidad and Tobago, Dr. Notis from Greece and Mr. Dalela from India would retain their positions as Vice-Chairpersons of the CRTA.

8. Various delegations thanked the outgoing Chairman for the work accomplished and complimented the new Chairman for his election.

#### C. EXAMINATION OF REGIONAL TRADE AGREEMENTS

##### I. Status Report on the Examination Work

9. The Chairman said that he would like to report on the informal consultations that his predecessor, Ambassador Meetoo, had carried out on 30 January 2004 concerning the CRTA backlog. Under these consultations, the following issues had been discussed: agreements with non-Members; agreements which would probably be superseded or modified at the occasion of the forthcoming EC enlargement; services agreements without defined specific commitments; and agreements on which the "factual" examination process had not advanced in the last few years, either because necessary information was lacking or because the parties had requested a delay. Regarding RTAs involving non-Members, Members had expressed their views on how to deal with such agreements and had requested the Secretariat to distribute a note on the drafting history of paragraph 10 of Article XXIV, which one delegation had referred to as being relevant to the issue at stake. The Secretariat had informed him that this note would be circulated soon, as a Job number document. Following its circulation, it was his intention to carry out a further round of consultations on how to deal with these agreements. Regarding agreements superseded or modified following the forthcoming EC enlargement, the representative of the European Communities had clarified during the consultations that the trade-related aspects of these agreements would be absorbed by the EC external trade policy, and that the preferences under these agreements would be substituted. It had been generally agreed that the examination of agreements that would be superseded should not be initiated. The need for a more structured but also pragmatic discussion on this entire question had been noted, and it was his intention to deal also with this at a further round of informal consultations. In between, the notification of the EC enlargement might have taken place and some of the issues clarified.

10. Regarding agreements without defined specific commitments, the Chairman noted that a consensus appeared to have emerged to adopt the following practical solution: in cases where such agreements had been notified to the Council for Trade in Services and transmitted to the CRTA for examination, the CRTA would keep them in a "to do list" until it was informed by the parties that specific commitments had been negotiated. Only then would the CRTA proceed with the first round of examination. The Chairman proposed that the Committee adopt this procedure, and it was so agreed.

11. The Chairman finally stated that various interesting ideas had been discussed regarding the long-standing RTA examinations. It had been generally felt that the Committee should conclude these examinations by a given time-frame, in principle not later than a year from that date. The Secretariat was in contact with the parties to these agreements so as to clarify pending issues; once the pending information had been distributed, a precise target date would be set. The Chairman sought confirmation on this procedure, and it was so agreed.

12. The representative of India thanked the Chairman for his report and the outgoing Chairman for his leadership and guidance in the past twelve months. His delegation was looking forward to the note being prepared by the Secretariat on GATT Article XXIV:10, and to further consultations on that issue.

**C.II.-X.** (The minutes of the examination of the Agreements listed under agenda items C.II-X are being distributed as separate documents.)

**D. OTHER BUSINESS**

13. The Chairman informed the Committee that, following a request made by the parties to the EFTA-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, and given that a number of agreements foreseen to be examined in this Session had not been included in the agenda due to lack of information, the Secretariat had modified the work programme of the next Session of the CRTA, to take place on 7-8 October 2004. Copies of this revised work programme had been made available in the room. He stressed that the deadline for submission of information was Friday, 3 September 2004. He also recalled that, in accordance with the calendar for the submission of biennial reports distributed in document WT/REG/W/48, reports on the operation of 19 agreements were due to reach the Secretariat by 31 July 2004; these reports would also be in the agenda of the Fall Session of the CRTA. In any case, a draft annotated agenda for the next CRTA session would be submitted to delegations during the month of July.

14. The Committee took note of the comments made.

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