

## WTO reform talks deadlocked ahead of MC14

The final World Trade Organization's General Council meeting on 10-12 March before trade ministers gather in Yaounde, Cameroon for the WTO's 14th ministerial conference (MC14) failed to bring the membership to a landing zone on key elements of the WTO reform agenda, raising serious doubts about the organization's ability to present a coherent reform package at MC14.

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# WTO reform talks expose deep divisions as MC14 looms

The final day of the World Trade Organization’s General Council session before the WTO’s 14th ministerial conference (MC14) exposed deep and unresolved divisions among members over the direction and substance of WTO reform.

by *D. Ravi Kanth*

GENEVA: With exactly two weeks remaining before the World Trade Organization’s 14th ministerial conference (MC14) opens in Yaounde, Cameroon, on 26 March, the final day of the General Council’s March session on 12 March appears to have laid bare the depth of divisions over WTO reform - and raised serious questions about the process that will carry the reform agenda forward to ministers at MC14, said several participants, who asked not to be quoted.

The afternoon session on the third and final day of the General Council meeting on 12 March was supposed to bring the membership closer to a landing zone so as to enable a successful MC14.

Instead, it seems to have produced a rather bruising three-hour marathon session that saw three separate reform proposals being introduced; a pointed public rebuke of Norwegian Ambassador Peter Olberg’s conduct in his capacity as facilitator for WTO reform; the conspicuous silence from key developing-country coalitions; and a tense standoff over what documents the General Council (GC) chair, Ambassador Saqer Abdullah Almoqbel of Saudi Arabia, would place in front of ministers at MC14, said participants familiar with the discussions.

The GC chair said it is ultimately for ministers to decide in Yaounde whether they wish to endorse a ministerial declaration or whether the MC14 chair would consider it more appropriate to issue a chair’s statement under his own responsibility, according to a WTO post on its website.

Concerning the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, the WTO Director-General, Ms. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, said that she, the MC14 host – Cameroon – and the GC chair were closely monitoring the situation and following developments

that could affect the meeting and participation.

In the meantime, she said arrangements for MC14 are still in place and plans have not been changed. Members will be kept fully informed and relevant updates will be shared promptly, she added.

**More proposals**

The GC session opened with Paraguay presenting a revised version of its draft ministerial decision on WTO reform.

The proposal was deliberately modest in scope – focused entirely on process, and not substance.

It called for the General Council to continue work on reform after MC14 under a structured work plan with defined timelines and checkpoints, two co-facilitators representing different levels of development, and work conducted primarily at the technical level in Geneva, said participants familiar with the development.

Paraguay framed it as a pragmatic fallback proposal: if a more detailed, substance-laden outcome could not achieve consensus, at least members would not leave Yaounde empty-handed, said participants, who asked not to be identified.

“Is there any member that cannot live with this version?” the Paraguayan delegate asked, echoing a question the reform facilitator himself had posed not so long ago.

The answer came rather swiftly and sharply, with the European Union seemingly declaring that it “cannot live with” a process-only approach, calling it a signal of the membership’s incapacity to demonstrate common direction.

Japan warned that starting over on identifying topics would “waste an entire

year” and was “completely damaging to our credibility”, said participants familiar with the development.

Brazil is understood to have dismissed the idea that ministers could credibly emerge from MC14 with merely a six-month plan to figure out what to discuss, said participants, who asked not to be identified.

Under GC agenda item 8, the United Kingdom introduced its own WTO reform paper – a more conceptual contribution organised around making the WTO “more relevant, more flexible, and more accessible”.

Although the UK’s proposal was apparently broadly welcomed as a thoughtful analytical contribution, with South Africa and Malaysia praising its structure and ambitions, Colombia is understood to have pushed back sharply on the UK’s characterization of special and differential treatment (S&DT), noting that when measured by share of global trade rather than the number of members, S&DT covers only 21 percent of global trade, not the 75 percent that the UK paper implied, said participants who asked not to be quoted.

Brazil appears to have made a similar point, arguing that the national security exception wielded by major economies was far more consequential to trade disruption than any use of special and differential treatment, said participants familiar with the discussions.

China’s position paper on WTO reform under the current circumstances, presented under GC agenda item 9, rounded out the trio of new submissions.

It emphasized a rules-based multilateral approach, the centrality of development, and the need to explore a “middle way” between moving together and not moving at all, said participants, who asked not to be quoted.

The United States offered a notably candid response, agreeing with much of the UK’s diagnosis – including that the assumption of converging economic models was “not just wrong, it was foolish” – while reiterating its vision of a “limited role” for the WTO in addressing the significant challenges confronting the trading system, said people familiar with the development.

It appears that the African Group, the Least-Developed Countries (LDCs), and the ACP (African, Caribbean, and Pacific) Group remained silent on the substance of the reform debate.

The LDC Group, speaking through The Gambia, delivered a brief joint statement across agenda items 7, 8, and 9 that merely “took note with interest” of the Paraguay, UK, and Chinese submissions, recalled the LDC Group’s own submission, and noted the African Group’s paper – all in the span of a few sentences.

Mozambique, speaking for the African Group, was even more terse: the group took note of the communications, said that they had been sent to capitals and that “reactions would be communicated”.

The ACP Group, represented by Barbados, acknowledged Paraguay’s effort but said that the proposal “unfortunately does not reflect the many months that we have spent on substance,” said participants familiar with the discussions.

Beyond that, the groups offered no substantive engagement with the WTO reform content, no detailed reactions to the facilitator’s package, and no signals about their “bottom lines” heading into Yaounde, said participants who asked not to be quoted.

According to one trade envoy, “for a process that will ultimately require the buy-in of the vast majority of developing-country members, this silence was deafening – and deeply worrying for those hoping to broker a deal in the remaining fourteen days”.

### India's questions

India’s trade envoy, Ambassador Senthil Pandian, apparently raised some hard questions during a series of interventions across the afternoon that cut to the heart of the process issues that many members had been circling around for weeks without directly raising them.

On Paraguay’s proposal, India offered qualified support, noting that “several elements of the document resonate positively” – particularly its flexibility, its grounding under the General Council’s authority, and its avoidance of prejudging positions.

India then signaled that it wanted to raise “an important issue” immediately after the agenda item, building visible tension in the room, said participants, who asked not to be identified.

The Indian trade envoy apparently raised issues of credibility of the facilitator’s conduct, noting that the facilitator had publicly identified the US

and India as “the two members holding back the reforms,” said participants, who asked not to be quoted.

India called this a breach of the facilitator’s duty of neutrality, warning that “publicizing half-baked information, especially when being a custodian of privileged information, risks eroding foundational values, undermining and weakening the trust and credibility” of the process.

India demanded clarification from the facilitator about the veracity of the statements and reminded the room that since the facilitator was not speaking in a national capacity, the rules governing the sharing of such information publicly must be followed, said participants, who asked not to be quoted.

India apparently made its most consequential interventions towards the end of the meeting, asking the DG, Ms Okonjo-Iweala, as to what would be sent to ministers at MC14, said participants, who asked not to be quoted.

Apparently, after the DG outlined plans to send an informal preparatory package containing the GC chair’s cover letter and the reform facilitator’s draft ministerial statement and work plan, India sought to know whether the package would also include members’ proposals that specifically addressed the ministerial statement and work plan – or only the facilitator’s version, said participants familiar with the discussions.

Ms. Okonjo-Iweala is understood to have confirmed that the package would only contain the facilitator’s report, to which India said, “That doesn’t give a complete picture of what we are doing here,” said participants who asked not to be quoted.

India sought more clarification, pointing out that there were in fact three proposals on the table – the facilitator’s report under his own responsibility and two proposals from members – none of which had consensus.

If all three proposals for the e-commerce session were being sent to ministers despite lacking convergence, India argued, “we cannot apply different rules for different areas”.

India seemingly made a request that all three reform proposals should go before ministers.

Several delegations echoed elements of India’s concerns throughout the session, said participants.

The Organisation of Eastern

Caribbean States (OECS) questioned altogether the rationale behind a facilitator-led process, arguing that it “has the potential to be fragmented and decentralised to the detriment of smaller capacity-constrained delegations”.

Hong Kong-China apparently posed pointed procedural questions about Paraguay’s proposal that implicitly questioned the facilitator model: why two co-facilitators and not one or three? Why prejudice that it would not be the GC chair who decides the modalities?

Pakistan suggested that the GC chair present to ministers a statement on reform “under his own responsibility” – a formulation that would effectively sideline both the facilitator and the director-general from the driver’s seat.

The perception taking hold among a growing number of delegations is that the facilitator’s draft ministerial statement and work plan – produced under the facilitator’s “own responsibility” rather than as a consensus text – are being elevated by the DG and supported by a coalition including the EU, Japan, and Singapore as the de facto basis for the reform outcome at MC14, with other proposals and perspectives being relegated to mere footnotes, said several participants, who asked not to be quoted.

By contrast, the GC chair appeared to take a more inclusive approach in his remarks, offering to reference all member submissions in his cover letter and inviting any member with a reform proposal to request MIN document status, said participants, who asked not to be quoted.

### Process showdown

The final thirty minutes of the GC session seemingly devolved into an extraordinary back-and-forth over the contents of the ministerial package – a procedural question that is, in reality, a proxy war over the substance of reform itself.

The US pointedly asked that if Paraguay’s proposal – which contains an alternative draft ministerial decision and work plan – would not be included, while non-consensus proposals in other areas like development would be, what was the justification for the different treatment, said participants, who asked not to be quoted.

Pakistan reinforced this by insisting that the GC chair should “exercise the

discretion to decide what goes into that package.”

Paraguay appears to have asked: if the documents being sent to ministers do not yet have consensus, at what point and through what modalities during the ministerial will actual negotiations take place, said several participants, who asked not to be quoted.

In her rather puzzling response to Paraguay, pointing to a formal negotiating session in the MC14 schedule, the DG suggested that facilitators could use break times, lunch periods, and other intervals when ministers were not in the breakout sessions to “take the draft document and take a look at it and see how they want to convene ministers to be able to look at those documents and agree,” said participants, who asked not to be quoted.

According to several participants, the DG’s remarks indicated that the actual negotiation of the reform outcome – the drafting and redrafting of what could become a ministerial decision – would not happen in the structured, transparent plenary or breakout sessions laid out in the “Road to Yaounde” modalities document, but in informal settings on the margins and during breaks.

The implication was unmistakable: while the formal MC14 programme binds ministers to four thematic breakout sessions on reform – foundational issues, decision-making and past mandates, development, and “level playing field” issues – the real deal-making is envisaged to take place in what amounts to “green room” configurations, convened by the facilitators outside the official schedule, said participants, who asked not to be quoted.

For smaller and capacity-constrained delegations already struggling to cover the breakout sessions with listening – in rooms offering English-only audio, this raises profound questions about who will actually be in the room when the reform text is being negotiated, said a trade envoy, who asked not to be quoted.

The EU and Singapore apparently supported the DG’s proposed approach. Singapore warned against sending ministers “a compilation of 200 pages which I can assure you none of our ministers would read”.

Brazil argued that it had invested in the facilitator-led process for nine months rather than submitting its own proposal, and that “the idea here is to

converge.”

The EU said it was “enough” for the GC chair to send a cover note annexing the facilitator’s draft ministerial statement and work plan, noting it was not a consensus document.

Apparently, the GC chair adopted an inclusive approach, stating that “I think that all should be captured and to make ministers aware” in his cover note to ministers, said participants, who asked not to be quoted.

This was a significant statement, said a trade envoy, arguing that the GC chair, as the only one of the three principals – the chair, the director-general, and the facilitator – who holds formal institutional authority over the reform process by virtue of the General Council’s mandate, was asserting that all member contributions deserved to be placed before ministers on an equal footing.

The DG followed up to re-frame the arrangement in starkly different terms. She appears to not have endorsed the GC chair’s inclusive approach, suggesting that the package she was “contemplating” would contain only the facilitator’s report and draft work plan, and that members wishing to have their proposals seen by ministers could submit them separately as MIN(26) documents – a procedurally available but practically inferior route that places the burden on individual delegations rather than carrying their proposals under the institutional weight of the GC chair’s transmission, said a trade envoy, who asked not to be quoted.

Following the DG’s assertion, the GC chair apparently made a change in his closing formulation from his earlier offer to include all submissions in his cover letter to a more limited invitation.

The Saudi chair said that members could request MIN document status from the Secretariat, and that he would “mention” their proposals in his cover note.

The GC chair’s concluding remarks appear to have reinforced the perception among several delegations that the facilitator and DG have effectively assumed operational control of the reform process, with the GC chair – the one actor who actually holds the institutional mandate – being progressively sidelined, said participants, who asked not to be quoted.

As one Geneva-based trade diplomat put it: “The facilitator has

completely hijacked the process from the GC chair, who is the only one in this trilateral who has the authority.”

### Road ahead

During the final afternoon of the General Council meeting, it appears to have emerged that the WTO reform process is fracturing along multiple fault-lines simultaneously, said a South American participant at the meeting.

Clearly, there are substantive divisions between those who insist on a substance-rich MC14 outcome and those who would accept a process-only mandate rather than risk no outcome at all, the participant said, adding that there are institutional tensions – between the GC chair’s prerogatives and the facilitator’s accumulated authority, and between both of them and the DG’s determination to send a coherent package to ministers.

There are also procedural disputes – over the fundamental fairness of elevating one non-consensus document while sidelining others.

With two weeks to go to MC14, the membership seems to have no agreed reform text, no consensus on what documents to place before ministers, and no clear process for negotiating during the ministerial itself, said participants, who asked not to be identified.

The DG’s remarks have now confirmed what many feared: that the formal breakout sessions at MC14 are designed for ministerial conversation, not negotiation, and that the actual text-based work will happen in informal configurations during breaks and along the margins – raising the spectre of the “green room” dynamics that developing countries have long resisted.

The African Group and LDCs – representing the host continent and the most vulnerable members – have yet to show their hand. And the facilitator’s credibility has been publicly questioned on the record – “a long time coming”, according to one Latin American ambassador.

The DG acknowledged the gravity of the moment in her closing remarks, urging members not to emerge from Yaounde unable to articulate what the WTO should work on.

“It will look very hard in my view and damage the credibility of ministers if they come out not being clear on what should be the work that is to be done at the WTO,” she warned.

But whether that message will concentrate minds or simply harden positions remains an open question as

the clock counts down to Yaounde, said several participants, who asked not to be quoted. (SUNS #10400)

## US rejection of draft reform package signals “chaos” at MC14

The United States effectively rejected the draft World Trade Organization reform package circulated by the Norwegian facilitator at the 11 March General Council meeting, just ahead of the WTO’s 14th ministerial conference (MC14), throwing the reform track into disarray.

by *D. Ravi Kanth*

GENEVA: The United States appeared to reject the draft reform package prepared by the Norwegian facilitator at the final General Council meeting on 11 March before the World Trade Organization’s 14th ministerial conference (MC14) gets underway in Yaounde, Cameroon, on 26 March.

The US rejection signals “utter chaos for transmitting any credible text to trade ministers,” said people familiar with the development.

On the second day of the General Council (GC) meeting (10-11 March), the US trade envoy, Ambassador Joseph Barloon, apparently flatly said that the discussions on WTO reform as elaborated by the facilitator for WTO reform, Ambassador Petter Olberg of Norway, “are still not matured”, said people familiar with the development.

Taking the floor before the discussion of other items on the GC agenda on 11 March, Ambassador Barloon is understood to have praised the efforts undertaken by the facilitator but categorically stated that the facilitator’s document continues “to reflect how several issues remained inchoate at this juncture and replete with ambiguities,” said participants familiar with the discussions.

The US trade envoy cited several examples, including persistent ambiguities in the proposed changes to the architecture of special and differential treatment (S&DT).

According to the current rulebook, this is based on a self-designated framework for developing countries, while some members view it

as reaffirming the Doha Development Agenda, in contrast to others opposing it, said participants who asked not to be identified.

Against this backdrop, Ambassador Barloon apparently said that endorsing the facilitator’s ministerial statement issued under his own responsibility “could only make matters more difficult for future discussions,” participants said.

Commenting on “level playing field” issues, the US trade envoy said the facilitator’s positions “will only slow down the process instead of accelerating the discussions,” participants said.

The US stated that the overall language of the facilitator’s document “would distract rather than focus members on future work,” emphasizing that Washington has an ambitious reform agenda like other members, participants said.

In short, the US maintained that the facilitator’s report could serve as “an element among others [like discussions at MC14],” while discussions on concrete proposals could commence only after the conference, said people familiar with the development.

### Bedlam

Ahead of MC14, members remained sharply divided over the e-commerce moratorium and the creation of a digital trade committee as proposed by Switzerland and a few other countries at the General Council meeting on 10 March, said participants familiar with the discussions.

It appears that unbridgeable

differences and deep divisions surfaced over the future of the organisation's work on digital trade, including whether to create a Committee on Digital Trade and to make permanent the long-standing moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions, according to discussions at the General Council on 10 March.

The debate took place under agenda item 2, which included the report by the facilitator on the Work Programme on Electronic Commerce, where three competing proposals remain on the table just weeks before MC14.

Ambassador Richard Brown of Jamaica, who is facilitating the discussions, acknowledged that consultations among proponents have failed to produce convergence, meaning ministers may ultimately have to grapple with multiple competing options at MC14.

"There are some areas of convergence," Ambassador Brown said, noting broad agreement that the WTO should continue to serve as a forum for discussions on trade-related aspects of e-commerce.

The facilitator also warned that "substantive differences remain", particularly over how the work programme should be structured and how long the moratorium should last.

At issue are three proposals, with members weighing three competing approaches, said participants who asked not to be quoted:

- The ACP Proposal: The African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) Group has proposed extending the moratorium only until the next ministerial conference while reinvigorating the existing 1998 Work Programme with a stronger development focus.

- The US Proposal: A second proposal, led by the US and 18 co-sponsors, calls for an open-ended extension of the moratorium, effectively locking in the current moratorium permanently. The proposal also sought to bring a new dimension into electronic transmissions based on electro-magnetic signals that "could effectively open the gateway to new technologies, particularly AI (Artificial Intelligence), that were never part of the 1998 e-commerce decision under which moratorium for not levying customs duties is continuing biennially at every ministerial conference," said participants who asked not to be quoted.

- The Swiss Proposal: A third

proposal from Switzerland, Canada, and other co-sponsors would establish a Committee on Digital Trade, institutionalizing the work programme while also extending the moratorium.

As members were unable to agree on a consolidated text, the facilitator said that all three proposals will be transmitted to ministers at MC14, alongside a factual summary of the state of play, said people familiar with the development.

"The political fight that failed to be settled in Geneva may now land squarely on ministers' desks in Yaounde," said participants who asked not to be quoted.

Several key players used the meeting to underline just how far apart members remain, said participants preferring not to be quoted.

The US argued that failing to adopt a permanent moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions risks opening the door to "complex and costly regulatory structures" affecting digital trade, reinforcing its push to make the measure open-ended.

India took the opposite position, reiterating that it does not support extending the moratorium.

It also pushed back against the proposal to create a Committee on Digital Trade, warning that it represents a structural change to the WTO architecture introduced without adequate prior consultations among members, said participants who asked not to be quoted.

Brazil signaled its willingness to maintain the e-commerce moratorium but stressed that any outcome must preserve policy space to address issues such as fiscal revenues, industrial policy, and the development implications of digital trade, said participants who asked not to be quoted.

Brazil also indicated that it could only support establishing a digital trade committee if its terms of reference are agreed simultaneously and firmly anchored in development concerns.

Separately, Brazil expressed support for making the moratorium on TRIPS non-violation and situation complaints permanent, stressing that the two moratoria address distinct issues and should not be treated as a package, said participants who asked not to be quoted.

### Development concerns

Many developing countries emphasized that any digital trade outcome must address persistent

development gaps rather than simply locking in the existing rules.

Rwanda said it could support extending the moratorium for two years but stressed the need for deeper analysis of its fiscal and development implications, said participants who asked not to be quoted.

Nigeria supported a temporary extension of the moratorium while calling for stronger capacity-building commitments to address the digital divide and infrastructure constraints.

The African Group also called for a single balanced ministerial outcome that includes time-bound instructions to address development priorities such as bridging the digital divide, technology transfer and capacity building, said people familiar with the development.

The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) backed rolling over the moratorium but said more empirical evidence is needed on its impact on revenues, consumers, and enterprises in developing economies.

Meanwhile, the proposal to establish a Committee on Digital Trade triggered mixed reactions.

Proponents said that the WTO needs a more permanent institutional platform to deal with the rapidly evolving digital economy.

Thailand said it was ready to co-sponsor the proposal, arguing that a structured mechanism could help members address emerging digital trade issues more effectively.

However, several developing countries questioned whether the proposal was being pushed too quickly.

Antigua and Barbuda warned that key questions remain unanswered, including how such a committee would relate to the existing work programme and whether development priorities would remain central.

Bangladesh said it is examining the proposal but stressed that members still lack clarity on the definition and scope of digital trade, making it difficult to consider establishing a new body at this stage, said participants familiar with the discussions.

The most contentious issue remains the future of the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions.

Some members are pushing to make the moratorium permanent, arguing that it provides certainty for businesses and supports the growth of

digital trade.

Others argue that locking in the measure permanently could constrain policy space for developing countries, particularly as digitalization shifts trade away from tariffed physical goods toward electronic transmissions.

Antigua and Barbuda warned that an open-ended moratorium could effectively become permanent without resolving key questions about its scope and economic impact.

Ambassador Brown noted that while most members appear willing to renew the moratorium in some form, “divergent views remain regarding the length of its extension,” said participants who asked not to be identified.

With MC14 fast approaching, the lack of convergence in Geneva means that ministers could be asked to choose among competing proposals rather than endorse a negotiated compromise, contrary to the “Geneva First” principle, said participants who asked not to be quoted.

Ambassador Brown cautioned that the presence of multiple texts could complicate efforts to reach agreement in Yaounde.

The debate reflects deeper tensions within the WTO over how to address the issue of the digital economy while ensuring that the rules governing it do not widen existing gaps between developed and developing members.

Significantly, the current discussions on e-commerce also revealed the grim reality that the WTO does not seem to respect its previous ministerial decisions, such as the MC13 Abu Dhabi ministerial decision on the e-commerce moratorium.

That decision stated somewhat explicitly: “We agree to maintain the current practice of not imposing customs duties on electronic transmissions until the 14th Session of the Ministerial Conference or 31 March 2026, whichever is earlier. The moratorium and the Work Programme will expire on that date.” Although the controversial Joint Statement Initiative (JSI) on incorporating the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFDA) into Annex 4 of the WTO Agreement dealing with plurilateral agreements was not scheduled on the agenda of the GC meeting, the issue cropped up during the discussion of several issues, said participants who asked not to be quoted.

India apparently said it has not changed its position against the IFDA, suggesting that it has never agreed to a decision on an issue that is strictly outside the mandate of the WTO, said participants familiar with the discussions.

In response to some members having said that the Indian proposal on

reducing the cost of remittances has no mandate, India said that some issues that have a negative mandate are still being negotiated here while the opponents maintain that the issue of remittances doesn't belong at the WTO, said participants who asked not to be quoted. (SUNS #10399)

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## WTO draft reform package sparks deep divisions ahead of MC14

At the final General Council meeting before the World Trade Organization's 14th ministerial conference (MC14), many members voiced significant concerns over the draft reform package circulated by the facilitator, with several arguing that the texts exceeded the areas of convergence reached during consultations.

by *D. Ravi Kanth*

GENEVA: Many members of the World Trade Organization on 10 March expressed concerns over the elements of the draft reform package, including the draft ministerial statement and annexed work plan prepared by the facilitator for the WTO's 14th ministerial conference (MC14), said people familiar with the development.

Objections were raised apparently on grounds that the draft texts appeared to go beyond areas of convergence identified during the consultations and introduced elements on which members had not reached a common ground, said people familiar with the development.

At the final General Council meeting before the start of MC14 in Yaounde, Cameroon, on 26 March, several members from South America - such as Paraguay and Argentina - as well as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Antigua and Barbuda (speaking on behalf of the six members of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States), among others, raised concerns regarding the scope of the reform agenda and the structure of the facilitator's draft ministerial statement and work plan, said people familiar with the development.

However, Brazil, South Africa and several other members indicated that while the package was not perfect, it reflected extensive consultations and could serve as a basis for further work.

The biggest surprise during the meeting was the position taken by Mozambique on behalf of the African Group, said one trade envoy, who asked not to be quoted.

The Group, which has circulated several detailed submissions on WTO reform in recent months, indicated that it could support the facilitator's draft ministerial statement and accompanying work plan as a basis for ministers' discussions, the envoy said.

Several trade envoys noted that this position appeared difficult to reconcile with the African Group's own reform proposals circulated in Geneva, including a detailed communication tabled just five days earlier, which stresses the importance of preserving consensus-based decision-making and safeguarding special and differential treatment.

The position was also viewed in light of the Maputo Ministerial Declaration adopted by African Union trade ministers on 26 February, which calls for development-centred WTO reform and cautions against approaches that could weaken the core multilateral principles.

According to several delegates, the WTO Secretariat is working “closely” with some developing-country coalitions, including the African Group and the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), in a technical assistance capacity.

Two African ambassadors involved in both groups, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the Secretariat often assists these groups administratively, including circulating draft statements and facilitating communications among members.

“In many ways they act as a kind of Post Box for the groups,” one ambassador said, noting that this role gives Secretariat officials visibility over draft texts and evolving positions before they are delivered formally.

Three trade envoys said that this interaction appears to have intensified in the run-up to MC14.

“There is a lot of engagement in the name of technical support,” one trade envoy said. “But it also means the Secretariat has a fairly good sense of where the groups stand on many issues.”

According to these trade envoys, this dynamic has coincided with growing “encouragement” directed at some developing-country groups not to be seen as obstructing the reform process ahead of MC14.

A former General Council chair from Africa cautioned that, with the ministerial conference taking place in Cameroon and the WTO led by an African Director-General, the African Group and the host country may face heightened expectations to demonstrate flexibility and support for outcomes emerging from the reform process.

For some trade envoys, the African Group’s intervention at the General Council therefore appeared difficult to reconcile with the positions articulated in its recent reform submissions and the Maputo ministerial declaration.

Even though the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the “Friends of the System” group including Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Korea and Switzerland, among others, supported transmitting the facilitator’s drafts to ministers, a number of delegations questioned the scope of the proposed work plan, explicitly stating that consensus had not emerged on key elements and that some aspects of the drafts appeared to reflect certain members’ approaches more prominently than others, said a trade envoy who asked not to be quoted.

The facilitator’s report highlighted three clusters of issues discussed during the consultations – decision-making, development, and “level-playing-field”

issues – and included a draft ministerial statement and work plan issued under his own responsibility for ministers’ consideration.

The United States did not take the floor during the reform discussion under this agenda item, according to participants.

### **China voices support**

China’s trade envoy, Ambassador Li Yongjie, supported the facilitator’s draft ministerial statement and work plan.

For China, said Ambassador Li, “it is imperative to preserve WTO’s fundamental principles, improve its functions, and further develop the WTO rules, to better respond to the challenges of our time and deliver more for inclusive development of the broad membership.”

She said, “China supports MC14 to adopt a Ministerial Statement on WTO Reform and a balanced Work Plan, which lays out the scope and modalities for Post MC14 work, based on the past 9 months’ consultations.”

The Chinese trade envoy said: “The current draft contained in Annex to the facilitator’s report JOB/GC/491 is a good basis for ministers’ endorsement at MC14. It reflects the diversity of views across the Membership and avoids prejudging the direction of reform. It contains the structure necessary to guide the member-driven Post MC14 reform work. Its adoption at MC14 would also provide an important political signal that members are seriously engaged in the reform process. China does not think an MC14 reform outcome that only touches on the process would work.”

However, several delegations indicated that they could not support the annex or elements of the work plan in their current form, raising questions about how the reform package would be transmitted to ministers ahead of MC14, said people familiar with the development.

Members of the “Friends of the System” group, which the DG keeps referring to as the “middle-group” countries – such as Korea, Singapore, Switzerland, Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand – seem to have echoed their support for transmitting the facilitator’s draft text to ministers as a basis for discussion, according to participants who attended

the meeting.

Brazil and China apparently suggested that the reform process should contain substantive elements alongside procedural guidance, indicating that a purely process-oriented outcome would not be sufficient, participants said.

Russia indicated that it would prefer the reform work plan to proceed without the ministerial statement in its current form, and raised concerns about how certain issues had been framed.

India raised strong reservations regarding the facilitator’s draft ministerial statement and work plan, indicating that discussions had not matured sufficiently to support forwarding the text to ministers in its current form.

The Indian statement appears to have contained very strong criticisms against the facilitator’s construction of the three reform tracks, the participant said.

India and Paraguay both raised concerns about the way that certain reform themes had been structured in the facilitator’s report, particularly in relation to decision-making and special and differential treatment.

Several delegations – including Paraguay and Argentina – criticised elements of the facilitator’s draft reform package, particularly the ministerial statement.

Brazil, however, indicated that it could work with the draft as a basis for further engagement.

Bangladesh and members speaking through the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States also expressed reservations regarding the scope and modalities of the proposed reform work.

Several delegations also raised questions about the procedural status of the facilitator’s report and how the draft ministerial statement and work plan would ultimately be transmitted to ministers ahead of MC14.

Pakistan stressed that the facilitator had been appointed to assist the General Council chair in identifying elements of a reform process and therefore any document sent to ministers should come formally from the General Council chair rather than the facilitator.

According to participants, Pakistan indicated that it could not support the transmission of the draft text unless there was explicit clarification that the document was being forwarded under the authority of the General Council chair.

Several diplomats said this intervention reflected broader concerns among members about the procedural basis for transmitting the draft reform package to ministers.

One ambassador said the discussion ended without a clear understanding among delegations as to what had been decided.

“A number of process questions were raised,” the envoy said. “But the item was closed rather quickly and it was still not entirely clear what exactly was being transmitted to ministers and in what form.”

Another diplomat said the manner in which the discussion concluded left several delegations uncertain about the status of the facilitator’s report and annex.

“Members were still seeking clarification on the process,” the envoy said. “Then suddenly the Chair moved to close the item.”

### **DG’s pitch**

At the marathon General Council meeting, the WTO’s Director-General, Ms. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, made a big pitch for WTO reform and the draft agriculture text prepared by the chair of the Doha agriculture negotiations, Ambassador Ali Sarfraz Hussain of Pakistan, said participants familiar with the development.

Earlier, the DG had reportedly viewed the agriculture negotiations as a proverbial “Achilles heel”, but now it appears that she has seemingly changed her stance, pleading for an outcome on agriculture at MC14, said people familiar with the development.

The DG also explained how the Minister-Facilitators were decided based on the countries that put forward their names, suggesting that there were no irregularities in the selection process, said people familiar with the development.

However, as Paraguay noted, it is somewhat inexplicable how the supporters of the facilitator’s reform proposals fielded their candidates while no opponents “threw their hats” into the selection process, said a participant who asked not to be quoted.

At the meeting, the DG made a strong pitch for reforms, exhorting members that they have to decide whether the organization should progress or remain in its current state, said people familiar with the development.

Given the realities of international trade today, she apparently said, “we need an MC14 that sets a credible path towards a reformed WTO, one that better serves the interests of all members and delivers meaningful outcomes in priority areas by MC15 and beyond.”

However, the current proposals on WTO reform prepared by the facilitator, though somewhat abstract without any quantifiable outcomes or clarity on how the most fundamental concerns plaguing the WTO could be addressed, appear to be replete with far-reaching implications for developing countries.

They are allegedly aimed at creating a permanent divide between the industrialized countries, including the United States, allowing them to decide their unilateral issues, and developing and poor countries, who will be pushed into “a trade ghetto”, said a former General Council chair from Africa, on background basis.

The DG, however, said MC14 “is what I call in my words a turning point ministerial ... One in which we can show that the organization is up to the job of taking criticisms seriously and then using this to reposition itself.”

She said rhetorically, “we cannot be in a position in which we all have criticisms of this organisation and the way it functions or doesn’t function and then when it comes the time to take action to work on this, we don’t do it.”

But the DG has hardly shown such urgency on reforming the WTO’s enforcement function by restoring the two-tier dispute settlement system, which could have been easily repaired if she had convinced the US to drop its opposition, said a trade envoy who asked not to be quoted.

While she appears to be constantly haranguing the developing and poorest countries to embrace the “top-down” reform agenda, she did not show that kind of urgency in addressing the core unresolved/mandated issues since the WTO’s 10th ministerial conference (MC10) in Nairobi, Kenya, in December 2015, said a former General Council chair who asked not to be quoted.

Ms. Okonjo-Iweala apparently said that “the outcome of this will be one that everybody, as I always say, will be watching as to whether we can move forward so the organization can do what is necessary to reposition itself and it all relies and depends on all of you here in Geneva.”

Demonstrating her apparent restiveness, the DG said, “we first have to give the ministers something that they can focus on and we then have to take work back so that the work and proposals and all your suggestions can be put on the table here in order to make the organization move forward.”

The DG is understood to have cautioned that if members “end up without the basis on which to engage ministers in Yaounde and we end up not being clear on what we are supposed to do when we come back, I think that will be a very huge missed opportunity and it will be very difficult to criticise after, because given the opportunity, we’ve not seized it to reform.”

She thanked the members for having taken the work in several negotiating groups seriously, saying that “your collective efforts and under the responsibility of the various chairs, we now have more or less texts that we can send to ministers for their consideration to deliver the political signals needed to advance post-MC14 negotiating work.”

The DG said that she had already emphasized last year that she does not expect ministers to engage in technical negotiations in Yaounde, but that they have to send focused messages on what they want ambassadors to do after, said participants who asked not to be quoted.

According to the DG, “as we move into the final phase ahead of MC14, our focus now turns to preparing your ministers for what lies ahead in Yaounde.”

She briefly outlined how MC14 will be organized, following the constructive feedback received throughout this nearly year-long consultation.

She informed members that the final “Road to Yaounde” document containing the modalities for the conference will be circulated after this General Council meeting.

That report will take into account any other feedback or adjustments that may arise from this General Council meeting, and it will be part of the package sent to ministers after the meeting.

Ms. Okonjo-Iweala said that the conference will run for four days from 26-29 March, although she indicated that some side events will take place on 24-25 March at the request of members.

She also ruled out any extension of MC14, suggesting that “the conference itself from 26-29 March will end as scheduled. It will not be extended.” (SUNS #10398)

# Reform facilitator's report triggers tensions ahead of GC meeting

The facilitator's report on World Trade Organization reform, circulated just ahead of a crucial General Council (GC) meeting, triggered significant procedural and substantive tensions among members, with several warning that the report risks shaping a contentious political atmosphere ahead of the WTO's 14th ministerial conference (MC14) in Yaounde.

by *D. Ravi Kanth*

GENEVA: The facilitator's report on World Trade Organization reform, circulated just days before the General Council (GC) meeting on 10-11 March, appears to have generated both procedural and substantive tensions that are likely to shape the political atmosphere heading into the WTO's 14th ministerial conference (MC14), to be held in Yaounde, Cameroon on 26-29 March, according to people familiar with the development.

Privately, questions of credibility have also been raised about the facilitator's report, as he seems to have allegedly compounded the issues by framing his report around three arbitrarily chosen themes – decision-making, development, and “level playing field” issues – using ambiguous attributions like “some members said and others said”.

These specific themes, trade envoys privately note, were never part of the MC13 Abu Dhabi Ministerial Declaration nor the MC12 Geneva Ministerial Declaration.

For context, paragraph 4 of the MC13 Ministerial Declaration states: “We reaffirm our commitment made at our Twelfth Session to work towards necessary reform of the WTO to improve all its functions and acknowledge the progress made in this regard. We note and value the work done to date to improve the daily functioning of WTO Councils, Committees and Negotiating Groups with a view to enhancing the WTO's efficiency, effectiveness, and facilitation of Members' participation in WTO work. We instruct the General Council and its subsidiary bodies to continue to conduct this work and report progress as appropriate to the next Ministerial Conference.”

This commitment builds on the MC12 Ministerial Declaration, which stated unambiguously in paragraph three: “We acknowledge the need to take advantage of available opportunities, address the challenges that the WTO is facing, and ensure the WTO's proper functioning. We commit to work towards necessary reform of the WTO. While reaffirming the foundational principles of the WTO, we envision reforms to improve all its functions. The work shall be Member-driven, open, transparent, inclusive, and must address the interests of all Members, including development issues. The General Council and its subsidiary bodies will conduct the work, review progress, and consider decisions, as appropriate, to be submitted to the next Ministerial Conference. We acknowledge the challenges and concerns with respect to the dispute settlement system including those related to the Appellate Body, recognize the importance and urgency of addressing those challenges and concerns, and commit to conduct discussions with the view to having a fully and well-functioning dispute settlement system accessible to all Members by 2024.”

However, several trade envoys, speaking on condition of anonymity, suggested that the facilitator appears to have knowingly constructed a reform agenda that is inconsistent with both the MC12 and MC13 outcome documents.

## Facilitator's report

The 12-page restricted document (JOB/GC/491) in question, seen by the SUNS, was prepared by Ambassador Petter Olberg of Norway in his capacity as Facilitator on WTO Reform.

As the report itself acknowledges, it is issued under the facilitator's own responsibility and does not represent a consensus position of the membership – a disclaimer that carries more weight than it might initially appear, according to trade envoys.

The facilitator's role is seemingly specific and limited: to organize discussions, compile views, and identify areas of convergence or divergence on reforming the organization.

The facilitator does not appear to hold independent authority to define negotiating outcomes or advance texts for adoption – or, in this case, “endorsement”. That authority belongs to the membership, exercised through the General Council.

A trade envoy noted that the facilitator was appointed by the General Council chair, not elected by members, and operates within parameters set by the membership.

Yet, critics say the report goes considerably further than compiling views. It presents a draft Ministerial Statement on WTO Reform and a draft post-MC14 Work Plan, recommending that both be submitted to ministers in Yaounde “for their consideration and endorsement”.

One Latin American negotiator described this as “significant overreach”, noting that “the facilitator is positioning himself as the author of outcomes rather than the organizer of a conversation”.

The procedural picture becomes murkier when the report is read alongside the annotated agenda for the March General Council meeting, circulated separately as JOB/GC/488.

Under item 2 of that agenda, the facilitator is listed among several chairs expected to report on MC14-related work.

The General Council is expected to “take note” of those reports – a procedural step that, in WTO practice, simply records that a report has been presented and that delegations have expressed views. It does not imply endorsement, adoption, or agreement with the contents.

The gap between “endorsement” and “taking note” goes to the heart of how texts that have not been discussed or agreed upon by members in Geneva are being positioned in relation to the ministerial process.

An African trade envoy put it plainly: “We are being asked to endorse

at the political level something that has not been agreed at the working level. That inverts how decisions are supposed to be made in this organization.”

The process that produced the report has also drawn scrutiny. According to the document, February was organized as a “WTO Reform Month” built around breakout sessions, bilateral consultations, and a concluding plenary meeting on 5 March.

While informal consultations are routine, several developing country delegations have privately raised concerns about the structural limitations of formats that rely heavily on small group discussions and bilateral engagement.

“For delegations with one or two people covering the entire WTO agenda, this kind of process is not inclusive by default – it requires deliberate effort to make it so, and that effort has been insufficient,” said a Geneva-based ambassador from a small island developing state.

At the plenary meeting to consider the facilitator’s report, a number of members rejected it, instead opting for an approach proposed by Paraguay that favours a process-oriented outcome, warning of the risk of having nothing, according to a South American trade envoy.

A related concern raised by several delegations is that the General Council chair has not convened open, plenary-style discussions where all members could engage with the facilitator’s texts on an equal footing.

The absence of such sessions makes it difficult for smaller delegations to track how drafts have evolved or to register their positions in a transparent and recorded setting.

### Three issues

Substantively, the facilitator’s report organizes the reform discussions around the three areas - decision-making, development, and “level playing field” issues – which form the “starting point” of the proposed post-MC14 work plan.

On decision-making, the report confirms that no member challenges the principle of consensus.

The debate instead concerns whether additional procedural tools or forms of flexibility should be explored.

However, the language around “decision thresholds” and the integration

of plurilateral agreements into the WTO framework has alarmed members who view consensus as both a right and a safeguard.

A Caribbean negotiator observed that “flexibility is a word that sounds neutral until you realize it means some members would have less say over outcomes that affect them directly”.

On development, the report reflects deep divisions.

Some members emphasize unresolved development mandates, the need to safeguard policy space, and the centrality of special and differential treatment (S&DT). Others frame development primarily through the lens of integration into global value chains.

The report flags concerns about the term “targeted” availability of S&DT – language that several developing country groupings see as an attempt to narrow access to flexibilities they regard as existing treaty commitments, not concessions to be renegotiated, said a former General Council chair.

The third workstream – “level playing field” issues – remains the least clear and potentially the most problematic, according to an African trade policy analyst.

The report covers everything from industrial subsidies to transparency and emerging agricultural issues, but provides little specificity about how these discussions would be structured.

“The breadth of this category means it could be used to open any negotiating front, depending on who has the political weight to set the agenda,” the analyst suggested.

A recurring criticism of the report is that its substance amounts to a catalogue of disagreements.

On nearly every issue, the text notes that “some members” hold one view while “others” hold another, without any serious attempt to map pathways toward reconciliation.

The effect is a 12-page document that appears comprehensive but offers no analytical basis for bridging positions, said several trade envoys.

Furthermore, because the facilitator’s report is the only written account of the consultations, members are left at the mercy of a single interpretation – the facilitator’s – of what was said, by whom, and with what degree of support.

There is no independent record, no compiled text reflecting members’ own

language, and no mechanism for verifying the summary’s accuracy. The report does not explain how disagreements were weighed or why certain formulations were chosen over others, said a South American trade envoy.

Beyond these three areas, the draft work plan also introduces “foundational issues” – including MFN, reciprocity, the balance of rights and obligations, and the role of the WTO Secretariat.

Here, the divergence is particularly sharp. While some members argue that these topics are essential, others view their inclusion as an attempt to reopen settled principles.

“Once you put MFN and non-discrimination on the table as items for reform, you are no longer strengthening the system – you are renegotiating its foundations,” said a former General Council chair from Africa.

The facilitator’s own assessment, contained in Section 6 of his report, has itself become a point of contention.

The text warns that “the greatest risk is not doing too much but doing too little” and argues that a ministerial commitment “anchors expectations, guides capitals, steadies markets, and buys time for needed reform”.

Several delegations have noted that this reads more as advocacy for a particular level of ambition – one that aligns closely with positions advanced by the European Union and like-minded members.

A Caribbean negotiator remarked that “the facilitator’s assessment section could have been written in any number of European capitals. It reflects one perspective presented as institutional common sense”.

Multiple delegations have also privately raised questions about the role of the WTO Secretariat in shaping the reform texts and managing the consultation process.

While the Secretariat’s function is to serve the membership, the perception among several developing country groupings is that institutional resources have been deployed in ways that favour a particular reform trajectory – one that emphasizes rule-making ambition over the development concerns and implementation deficits that many members regard as more pressing.

The line between technical support and substantive influence is not always easy to draw, but the concern is real and widely shared, said people familiar with

the ongoing developments.

As it stands, the report raises a fundamental institutional question that the General Council will need to confront: whether texts that have not been agreed upon in Geneva should be presented to ministers as potential ministerial outcomes.

In a member-driven organization,

the sequencing of decisions determines who shapes the agenda and on what terms.

The General Council meeting in March will be the first real test of whether members intend to clarify that distinction - or allow it to remain conveniently blurred, said people familiar with the negotiations. (*SUNS #10397*)

and the WTO Reform Facilitator, it is unclear what those inputs were.

However, the schedule of meetings suggests that very little time has been allotted to the central issues plaguing the WTO, such as ministerial conversations on “foundational issues”, “decision-making and past mandates”, “development”, and “level-playing field” issues, among others.

The schedule of meetings will follow these timings:

1. Starting Time: On 26 and 27 March, sessions will begin at 10:00. On 28 and 29 March, sessions will start at 09:00. These adjustments respond to concerns raised about the previous 07:00 start time.

2. Length of Opening Session: In response to concerns about the length of the opening session, and in balance with the plans of the host, who requested it not be cut too short, it is proposed that the opening session now last three hours instead of four. This addresses concerns from those who found the previous duration too long, while respecting the host’s request and still providing sufficient time for the ceremony to be conducted in a manner that ensures its significance.

3. Breaks: Lunch breaks and other breaks are now clearly indicated in the schedule. During breaks, meeting rooms will be available for members who wish to hold their bilateral or group coordination meetings.

4. Breakout Sessions: Given the feedback on the number of topics in breakout sessions, and in consultation with the WTO Reform Facilitator and General Council Chair, these have now been streamlined as follows:

- Ministerial Conversation on Foundational Issues on WTO, including its principles
- Breakout Session on Decision-Making and Past Mandates
- Breakout Session on Development
- Breakout Session on Level Playing Field Issues.

The Director-General says that the number of breakout groups is being scaled back to six. “This enables us to also have six listening-in rooms to cover the six Ministerial groups.”

Given the appointment of Minister-Facilitators, Ms. Okonjo-Iweala said: “There will now be one Minister-Facilitator per group instead of two. There will also be only one WTO

## Critical issues sidestepped in “Road to Yaounde” schedule for MC14

A “Road to Yaounde MC14” document issued by the World Trade Organization Director-General on 6 March has reportedly caused confusion among several members and triggered fresh uncertainty over their participation, amid heightened geopolitical tensions following the escalating US-Israel military action against Iran.

by D. Ravi Kanth

GENEVA: A “Road to Yaounde MC14 – Modalities, Schedule of MC14 Sessions and Minister-Facilitators” document issued by the World Trade Organization’s Director-General on 6 March appears to have confused several member countries, prompting a rethink on participation, according to people familiar with the development.

A rethink on participating at the WTO’s 14th ministerial conference (MC14), which is scheduled to begin in Yaounde, Cameroon, on 26 March and conclude on 29 March, is currently underway in capitals due to the unprovoked war launched by the United States and Israel against Iran, which has now expanded into a regional war, said a trade envoy who asked not to be quoted.

The WTO Director-General, Ms. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, sent a restricted informal document (WT/MIN(26)/INF/9) to members on 6 March, setting out the roadmap for the meetings to be held in Yaounde.

Even though the chair of the General Council is the ultimate authority to decide on MC14’s events as per the WTO’s General Council decision of 2002, the DG seems to be deciding matters without prior consultation, the trade envoy said.

Speaking to SUNS on a background basis, a Middle East envoy, whose country has been drawn into the conflict between the US and Israel against Iran, sought to know whether MC14, scheduled to begin on 26 March, can be held at all.

The envoy said he had heard from several trade envoys that they are seriously reconsidering whether to attend the meeting due to growing fears over the impact of the conflict, notwithstanding the DG’s modalities.

At the General Council meeting scheduled to be held on 10-11 March, the issue of convening the meeting in Yaounde amid several countries’ decision to close their airspace could arise, said trade envoys who asked not to be quoted.

### Road to Yaounde

In her introduction to the “Road to Yaounde” document, seen by the SUNS, the DG said: “I would like to thank all Members for participating in the consultations since last year on the Road to Yaounde document, including the Schedule of MC14 Sessions, and for the constructive feedback provided.”

Although the DG stated that she has reflected on members’ inputs, together with the General Council Chair

Reform transparency plenary to hear the takeaways from all topics discussed on 26 and 27 March, now scheduled for Friday, 27 March at 19:30.”

### Ministerial Sessions

According to the Director-General’s note, “All Ministerial Sessions on specific areas will be held in plenary format on Saturday, 28 March.”

The Director-General’s roadmap provides very little time for the issues plaguing the WTO, such as:

- Dispute Settlement Reform update: 30 minutes
- Fisheries subsidies: 1 hour
- IFDA (Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement) incorporation: 1.5 hours
- E-commerce work programme and moratorium: 1.5 hours
- Agriculture: 2.5 hours
- Development including LDC issues: 2 hours

The closing session, according to the Director-General’s note, is as follows: “The schedule for the last day, 29 March, remains the same. As with previous Ministerial Conferences, there will be an Informal HODs meeting prior to the closing session, to prepare all Ministers, review all documents to be put forward for Ministerial consideration, and gather feedback before moving to the formal closing session. If the Informal HODs finishes ahead of the time allotted, the closing session may also take place earlier than scheduled. The only certainty is that MC14 will finish no later than 13:00 on 29 March. For Members who wish to conduct their own bilateral or group meetings, rooms will be available before the Informal HODs and after the formal closing session.”

### SCHEDULE OF MC14 SESSIONS

The DG said that to “ensure a business-like, transparent, and inclusive Conference – with the full participation of all Ministers in all sessions, the table below provides the order of sessions during the Conference. The sessions will consist of an Opening Session, Breakout Sessions on WTO Reform, a transparency plenary session on WTO Reform, Ministerial Sessions on specific topics, an Informal HODs at Ministerial level and a Closing Session.”

Tuesday and Wednesday, 24 and 25 March:

Time for Side Events, Bilateral and Group Coordination Meetings

Thursday, 26 March:

Opening Session 10:00-13:00

Ceremonial session

- Welcome Remarks by MC14 Chairperson
- Welcome Remarks by Director-General – including acknowledgment of progress on accessions
- Remarks by Host and invited guests, including Heads of State or Heads of Government

Formal Transmittal of work

- Formal transmittal of work to the Ministerial Conference - Remarks by the General Council Chairperson

Fisheries Subsidies – short celebration of entry into force

- Deposits of Instruments of Acceptance of the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies and Celebration of the Agreement’s Entry into Force

Explanation of Conduct of Ministerial Sessions, including breakout sessions by Director-General

Lunch Break

Rooms will also be available for Bilateral and Group Coordination Meetings 13:00-15:00

Breakout Session: Ministerial Conversation on Foundational Issues on WTO, including its principles 15:00-18:00

Break

Rooms will also be available for Bilateral and Group Coordination Meetings 18:00-19:00

Ceremonial Reception and Gala Dinner hosted by Cameroon – 19:00

Friday, 27 March:

WTO Reform Breakout Session – Decision-making, Past Mandates 10:00-12:00

Lunch Break

Rooms will also be available for Bilateral and Group Coordination Meetings 12:00-14:00

WTO Reform Breakout Session – Development 14:00-16:00

Break

Rooms will also be available for Bilateral and Group Coordination Meetings 16:00-16:30

WTO Reform Breakout Session – Level Playing Field Issues 16:30-18:30

Break

Rooms will also be available for Bilateral and Group Coordination Meetings 18:30-19:30

WTO Reform Transparency Plenary Session 19:30

Saturday, 28 March:

Update on Dispute Settlement Reform by the DSB Chairperson 09:00-09:30

Ministerial Session on Fisheries Subsidies 09:30-10:30

Ministerial Session on Incorporation of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFDA) 10:30-12:00

Lunch Break

Rooms will also be available for Bilateral and Group Coordination Meetings 12:00-14:00

Ministerial Session on E-Commerce Work Programme and Moratorium 14:00-15:30

Ministerial Session on Agriculture 15:30-18:00

Ministerial Session on Development including LDC Issues 18:00-20:00

Sunday, 29 March:

Informal Heads of Delegation Meeting at Ministerial-Level in Preparation for the Closing Session 09:00-12:00

Formal Closing Session of the Ministerial Conference 12:00-13:00

Rooms will be available for bilateral and group coordination meetings before the Informal HODs and after the Formal Closing Session

#### Notes:

1. Pre-recorded General Statements of Ministers and Heads of Delegation: Traditionally, Ministers have delivered their general statements during the plenary sessions of a conference. In line with the views expressed by Members at MC12 and MC13 to organize Ministerial Conferences in a more business-like and streamlined manner – and consistent with practice at the previous two MCs – Ministers' general statements will again be pre-recorded. All statements will be made available on the WTO website and will be streamed at various locations throughout the Conference Centre in Yaounde from 26 to 29 March 2026.

- Ministers and Heads of Delegation will be given the opportunity to pre-record their political statements and send them to the Secretariat by Monday, 16 March for uploading on the WTO website.
- Statements should not exceed a maximum of 5 minutes.
- Please refer to the Information Note on the technical specifications and how to submit the pre-recorded statements – WT/MIN(26)/INF/7 issued on 20 January 2026.

2. WTO Reform Breakout Groups: There will be 6 groups for each breakout session. Each breakout group session will be facilitated by a Minister-Facilitator. The six groups will discuss the same topic at the same time. Ministers will rotate through the different groups so that they can meet and interact with as many of their colleagues as possible. This is based on Members' feedback. Each group will be balanced by geography, level of development, and diversity of perspectives on topics.

- A separate information note on WTO Reform, including guiding questions for Ministers, has been circulated as WT/MIN(26)/INF/15.
- Listening-in facilities will be available to allow Members to follow the discussions of the group to which they are not assigned. Access to a listening-in room will be limited to one delegate per Member. The listening-in audio will be provided in English only.

3. Ministerial Sessions on Specific Areas: Each session will be chaired by a Minister-Facilitator. Ministers will engage in exchanges to provide political direction for work ahead; and address unresolved issues to finalize specific decisions, Ministerial guidance, or other outcomes. Ministers will also meet in various configurations, as needed, including during the time allocated for bilateral and group coordination meetings.

4. Informal Heads of Delegation Meeting at Ministerial Level in Preparation for the Closing Session: On 29 March, the MC14 Chairperson and the Director-General will convene an Informal Heads of Delegation meeting. This will provide an opportunity to hear reports from Minister-Facilitators on the discussions in their respective areas, including any outreach conducted. Ministers will also use this occasion to consider any potential outcomes that may be presented for approval or endorsement during the formal closing session.

5. Formal Closing Session of the Ministerial Conference: Immediately after the Informal Heads of Delegation meeting, the Ministerial Conference will convene in formal mode to take any necessary action, including gaveling final decisions. Following this, the Director-General and the MC14 Chairperson, on behalf of the MC14 Officials (Chairperson and Vice Chairpersons), will deliver closing statements.

#### MINISTER-FACILITATORS

WTO Reform:

H.E. Mr Espen Barth Eide (Norway), Minister of Foreign Affairs, WTO Reform Coordinator.

H.E. The Honourable Todd McClay (New Zealand), Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Forestry, Minister for Trade and Investment, Associate Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vice Chairperson – Fourteenth WTO Ministerial Conference.

H.E. Mr Han-Koo Yeo (Republic of Korea), Minister for Trade.

H.E. Sir Chris Bryant (United Kingdom), Minister of State for Trade.

H.E. Ms Grace Fu (Singapore), Minister-in-charge of Trade Relations, Minister for Sustainability and the Environment.

H.E. Mr Manuel Tovar Rivera (Costa Rica), Minister of Foreign Trade.

Fisheries Subsidies:

H.E. Minister Francisco Tiu-Laurel (Philippines), Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Vice Chairperson – Fourteenth WTO Ministerial Conference.

Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement:

H.E. The Honourable Dwight Fitzgerald Bramble (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines), Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Diaspora Affairs (Non-IFDA Participant).

H.E. Dr Jumoke Oduwole (Nigeria), Minister of Industry, Trade and Investment.

E-Commerce Work Programme and Moratorium:

H.E. Senator The Honourable Kamina Johnson Smith (Jamaica), Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, Vice Chairperson – Fourteenth WTO Ministerial Conference.

Agriculture:

H.E. Dr Syed Tauqir Hussain Shah (Pakistan), Federal Minister, Prime Minister's Office.

Development including LDC Issues:

H.E. Mr Luc Magloire Mbarga Atangana (Cameroon), Minister of Trade, Chairperson – Fourteenth WTO Ministerial Conference. (SUNS #10397)

# MC14 draft farm text advances despite US objections, C4 discontent

Many members and negotiating groups at the World Trade Organization on 6 March offered cautious support for the draft text issued by the chair of the Doha agriculture negotiations for the WTO's 14th ministerial conference (MC14), though the United States and the Cotton Four countries – those most affected by US cotton subsidies – voiced clear opposition.

by *D. Ravi Kanth*

GENEVA: Many members and coalitions at the World Trade Organization on 6 March appeared to cautiously welcome the draft text prepared by the chair of the Doha agriculture negotiations for the WTO's upcoming 14th ministerial conference (MC14), barring opposition from the United States as well as the Cotton-Four (C4) countries most affected by US cotton subsidies, said people familiar with the development.

At a meeting of the Doha agriculture negotiating body on 6 March, referred to as the Committee on Agriculture in Special Session (CoA-SS), the chair, Ambassador Ali Sarfraz Hussain of Pakistan, secured approval for the text (Job/AG/273/Rev.1) from many members and coalitions, said people familiar with the development.

During the meeting, many members – including the European Union, China, India, Indonesia, and Brazil – and coalitions including the Cairns Group of farm-exporting countries; the G10 group of farm-defensive countries, such as Norway, Japan, Switzerland, and Chinese Taipei, among others; the African Group; the least-developed countries (LDCs); and the ACP (African, Caribbean, and Pacific) group – seemingly endorsed the revised draft text.

Earlier, India was viewed as a major opponent of the draft text because it made no explicit mention of the unresolved and mandated issue of a permanent solution for public stockholding (PSH) programs for food security purposes in developing countries.

Perhaps this is the first time since MC11 in Buenos Aires, Argentina in December 2017 that India has not submitted a proposal of its own to underscore that the permanent solution

remains at the core of its agenda, said a former Indian farm trade negotiator.

However, at the Buenos Aires meeting, the US reportedly killed the draft text finalised by the facilitator-minister, Amina Mohamed, the former Kenyan cabinet secretary.

India appears to be lowering its ambitions on several major issues for the Yaounde meeting because of indirect pressure from Washington, the negotiator said.

At the meeting on 6 March, India is understood to have said that it raised some questions regarding the mandate, adding that it still has those questions – without explaining what those questions are, said a participant, who asked not to be quoted.

New Delhi apparently said that notwithstanding those questions, it is in a position to use the text for further work, the participant said.

The text will now be forwarded to the General Council meeting scheduled to take place on 10-11 March to be debated once again.

In all likelihood, the text will be “parachuted” to the Yaounde meeting, unless the US chooses to block the text at the General Council meeting, said several farm trade negotiators, who asked not to be quoted.

## US opposition

At the meeting, a US farm trade official appears to have said that the text is not very helpful.

The official apparently said no remedy is provided, adding that the problems it had raised continue to exist in the text. “I mean, whatever problems we had, the same problems exist.”

The official asked somewhat rhetorically how progress can be made, adding that no new ideas have been given proper emphasis, said farm trade negotiators who were present at the meeting.

However, the revised draft text (Job/AG/273/Rev.1) says in the operational paragraph that “the negotiations shall continue on the basis of Members’ existing and future contributions, including proposals on possible new approaches to advance the negotiations.” The US seemingly laid blame on including past decisions and declarations, telling the chair that if members have to work on the basis of those past decisions and declarations, then the same problems will again surface, the negotiators said.

To recall, it is common knowledge that after securing the Trade Facilitation Agreement at the WTO's 9th Ministerial Conference in Bali, Indonesia, in December 2013, the US conceded on the Bali “peace clause”, or the interim decision on public stockholding programs for food security.

That decision was resurrected with more clarity about concluding the permanent solution at a General Council meeting in 2014, after India blocked the protocol to the Trade Facilitation Agreement.

Yet, the US and other industrialized countries changed the course of the negotiations at the WTO's 10th ministerial conference (MC10) in Nairobi, Kenya, in December 2015 by refusing to agree on the permanent solution, with the then-US Trade Representative Michael Froman having inserted a sentence in paragraph 30 of the Nairobi ministerial declaration: “We recognize that many Members reaffirm the Doha Development Agenda, and the Declarations and Decisions adopted at Doha and at the Ministerial Conferences held since then, and reaffirm their full commitment to conclude the DDA on that basis. Other Members do not reaffirm the Doha mandates, as they believe new approaches are necessary to achieve meaningful outcomes in multilateral negotiations. Members have different views on how to address the negotiations. We acknowledge the strong legal structure of this Organization.”

The US repeatedly mentions the stalemate, although the chair has included a sentence in the preamble of the revised draft text by incorporating the following language: “Noting with

concern the limited progress achieved to date on several negotiating issues, and acknowledging the significant divergences on negotiating approaches and on possible outcomes across areas of the negotiations, and the need to address the existing stalemate in these negotiations.”

#### Cotton-Four

The C4 countries – Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad – seem to have expressed sharp concern at the meeting about not addressing the cotton issue, which has been “hanging fire” since the WTO’s sixth ministerial conference in Hong Kong-China in December 2005, said people familiar with the development.

To recall, paragraph 11 of the Hong Kong ministerial declaration stated explicitly: “We recall the mandate given by the Members in the Decision adopted by the General Council on 1 August 2004 to address cotton ambitiously, expeditiously and specifically, within the agriculture negotiations in relation to all trade-distorting policies affecting the sector in all three pillars of market access, domestic support and export competition, as specified in the Doha text and the July 2004 Framework text.”

The C4 countries pointed out at the meeting that the latest revised draft text ought to have mentioned the urgent need to address the problem of trade-distorting domestic subsidies, which are being provided largely by the US, said farm trade negotiators who asked not to be quoted.

Instead of addressing the systemic issues raised by the C4 countries, the WTO Director-General, Ms Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, seems to be engaging FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football Association) to host a show, along with other proposed fashion shows, as part of the development assistance component, said a C4 negotiator who asked not to be quoted.

The DG, given her World Bank background, seemingly reckons that trade issues can be addressed with investments, said another farm trade negotiator.

Ahead of MC14 later this month, the DG signed a memorandum of understanding with the European Investment Bank (EIB) “to enhance sustainable trade and investment worldwide” in an alleged attempt to secure support for the controversial Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFDA), which has been

opposed by India since 2017, said people familiar with the development.

#### Revised Draft

The revised draft “Declaration on Agriculture, Trade and Global Food Security” is as follows:

“The Ministerial Conference,

Recognizing the role that the WTO Agreement on Agriculture has played since 1995, and continues to play, in supporting global trade in agricultural products and food security;

Recalling the long-term objective of establishing a fair and market-oriented agricultural trading system and of providing for substantial progressive reductions in agricultural support and protection, in line with Article 20 of the Agreement on Agriculture;

Recalling previous Ministerial Decisions and Declarations;

Recalling that special and differential treatment for developing country Members, including Least Developed Countries, is an integral part of the agriculture negotiations;

Recognizing the urgent need to strengthen global food security, particularly for developing country Members, including Least Developed Countries and net food-importing developing countries; and the role that the reform of agricultural trade can play in responding to the challenges facing agricultural production and trade, including price volatility, extreme weather events and exposure to global shocks and crises;

Noting the heightened vulnerabilities of farmers, particularly smallholder farmers, and rural communities, requiring urgent, balanced, and development-oriented responses;

Noting with concern the limited progress achieved to date on several negotiating issues, and acknowledging

the significant divergences on negotiating approaches and on possible outcomes across areas of the negotiations, and the need to address the existing stalemate in these negotiations;

Considering the above, the Ministerial Conference:

1. Commits to engaging constructively, transparently and inclusively to fulfil the objective of establishing a fair and market-oriented agricultural trading system and to deliver outcomes that, inter alia, strengthen global food security.
2. Commits to revitalizing the agriculture negotiations pursuant to Article 20 of the Agreement on Agriculture, and subsequent Ministerial Decisions and Declarations.
3. Agrees that the negotiations shall continue on the basis of Members’ existing and future contributions, including proposals on possible new approaches to advance the negotiations.
4. Requests the CoA-SS Chair, in consultation with Members, to promptly establish following this Conference a calendar of meetings and milestones in the negotiations, and invites senior officials to meet periodically after MC14 to review progress and provide guidance on the way forward, as needed.
5. Invites Members and the relevant international organizations to continue supporting the participation of developing country Members, including Least Developed Countries, in the negotiations, including through technical assistance and capacity-building initiatives.” (SUNS #10396)

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# UK outlines WTO reform “vision” ahead of MC14

The United Kingdom has tabled a reform proposal ahead of the World Trade Organization’s 14th ministerial conference (MC14) calling for a WTO that is “more relevant, more flexible and more accessible,” arguing that the organization is not functioning as it should and that the current status quo is untenable.

by D. Ravi Kanth

GENEVA: A proposal from the United Kingdom (UK) for reforming the World Trade Organization, ahead of its 14th ministerial conference (MC14), calls for an organisation that is “more relevant, more flexible and more accessible” while reiterating its concern that “the WTO matters but it is not working as it should.”

In its proposal (WT/GC/W/993), circulated on 6 March, the UK has proposed comprehensive reforms, saying that “it is clear the status quo is unsustainable”.

“Our vision,” says the UK, “is for an organization that keeps pace with the modern economy and drives global growth and development for all, one that allows for a greater diversity of economic models and better manages the negative externalities this diversity creates.”

In this regard, it wants “an organisation that is more relevant, more flexible and more accessible.”

The UK maintains that “the WTO matters for the UK and we will work with Members to reform and reposition the organization and the rulebook it represents.”

It thanked “Ambassador Petter Olberg of Norway for facilitating this important work and to the Secretariat for all its supporting efforts,” as well as members who have engaged in the facilitator’s seemingly muddled process.

“While the UK continues to care about the ongoing work of the WTO, this paper sets out our contribution on the issues in this process and the other areas that will be central to reforming the WTO,” the UK said.

Under the sub-heading “Diagnosis: The WTO matters but it is not working as it should,” the UK says: “The original vision of the WTO leading to the inevitable global harmonization of

economic models has not been realized.”

It argues that “this is one of the root causes of the problems Members have talked about addressing for many years” and that this “may be the last chance to do so.”

According to the UK, “the rules are fracturing around us daily:

- the playing field is not level; the rules on market-distorting practices have failed to keep pace with what is happening and with concerns about trade imbalances;

- the track record of using the mechanisms within the existing system effectively is patchy, with, for example, the latest WTO reports from September 2025 showing disappointingly few members have submitted notifications on industrial subsidies;

- the dispute settlement system is not fully functioning;

- the decision-making system itself is paralyzed, delivering just two new multilateral agreements in 30 years;

- the benefits of the WTO and share of global trade have not been evenly shared, particularly amongst least developed countries; and

- over 75% of Members have access to Special and Differential Treatment, including some of the largest economies in the world, which cannot be right [this claim is not backed by figures, and S&DT is based on the self-designated framework for developing countries].”

## UK’s vision

While lamenting the failure of the “inevitable global harmonization of economic models,” the UK states: “Our vision needs to be for a system that allows for a greater diversity of economic models and better manages the negative

externalities this diversity creates. We can no longer pretend that we will all become market economies or that economic development is binary. Harmonization should be encouraged, but where it is just not possible, we need an alternative.”

“Our vision is for a system that caters for the world of today, a system Members can live by and enforce, where existing rules are maintained, functions holding the organization back are addressed and the rulebook is expanded into new areas,” it adds.

The UK maintains that “the WTO can and should do more than monitor existing agreements. The WTO needs to be:

- more relevant: meeting the challenges of today by taking action to create a more level playing field and rules that reflect the global trading system today;
- more flexible: less rigid, flexing to the changing nature of the global trading system. Responding to challenges, making decisions and resolving disputes; and
- more accessible: for certain members the cost of participating and engaging in the WTO can feel too high; an approach that targets support to those that need it the most is needed. The WTO also needs to be open to input from a broader range of stakeholders.”

The “alternative model” being propagated by the UK is that “the WTO plays a vital role in providing stability and predictability for businesses and consumers, allowing for growth and development in the UK and all corners of the world”.

Using the banking aphorism “too big to fail,” the UK says: “Put simply, the Multilateral Trading System is too important to fail, but it will fail if we do not act.”

The UK argues that the WTO rulebook “was never meant to be static,” emphasizing that “rules made in the 1990s do not reflect the realities of the trading system in 2026”.

It is well known that the rulebook created by the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations has several flaws, as developing countries noted in 2001 when they brought implementation-related issues to the center stage before the WTO’s fourth ministerial conference in Doha – issues that were successfully scuttled by the US, as noted by several

studies and developments.

According to the UK, “the (WTO’s) rulebook was far from perfect; theoretically, it had a ‘built-in agenda’ to fill gaps and reform, but in practice this work was never completed.”

The UK insisted that “we need a WTO that is relevant and responsive to today’s realities.”

It argued that “a reformed WTO needs new rules” to address these issues in several areas: “leveling the playing field”; the MFN (most-favored nation treatment) framework; unfinished business from 1995, particularly in agriculture and services – the rules agreed then “were a solid foundation, but Members always knew they would need to be developed further”; and equipping the UK on digital trade, including a permanent e-commerce moratorium, incorporation of the Agreement on Electronic Commerce, the start of negotiations on its second phase, and deeper consideration of digital trade under a newly created Digital Committee.

The UK said that “multilateral trade also has an important role to play in addressing the global challenges of climate change and environmental degradation,” hinting at measures like the European Union’s carbon border adjustment mechanism.

The UK also said that “a reformed WTO must revisit services commitments to reflect their central role in the global economy.”

On the failed agriculture negotiations, the UK says: “WTO agriculture rules have supported the growth of global trade, but efforts to update them have stalled even as Members highlight both longstanding and emerging issues that must be addressed.”

Therefore, “a renewed momentum is needed. These discussions should be taken forward within the existing agriculture reform negotiations and any other agreed forum, as appropriate.”

On restoring the dispute settlement system, the UK said that Members “need a fully functioning dispute settlement system to ensure accountability. We all need to be confident that the rights we have negotiated can be enforced. Without this the value of the WTO is fundamentally undermined.”

On decision-making, the UK argues that “consensus remains a key principle to ensure both the legitimacy

of decisions and the equity of how those decisions are made. But consensus is being conflated with unanimity and is being abused to block progress.”

“The UK supports exploring other tools to help reach consensus-based decisions, including opt-outs, silence procedures and more regularly escalating issues to Ministers.”

The UK said it also supports “examining how other multilateral institutions effectively employ these tools and exploring possible changes to the rules requiring consensus on certain administrative matters such as appointment of committee chairs.”

The UK came out in full support of plurilateral agreements, expressing concern that they continue “to be blocked by Members whose interests are not harmed by them”.

It cited the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement and the Agreement on Electronic Commerce, which are being opposed by India.

The UK maintains that “plurilateral agreements have a long history in WTO and GATT and are a clear way forward when Members want to make progress at a different pace. The plurilateral agenda at the WTO cannot keep being unjustifiably blocked by a select few, preventing its modernization. The UK will no longer stand for this.”

Commenting on Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT), the UK says that it “is a core principle of the WTO and a necessary tool for many developing countries.”

However, according to the UK, “that so many Members, including some of the largest economies in the world, have access to S&DT undermines the credibility of the organization.”

It says that “the issue is not what label is applied, but who gets access to S&DT and in which circumstances,” underscoring the need for differentiation among developing countries through “a case-by-case, agreement-by-agreement approach [that] would allow for greater concessions for those who need them the most.”

In conclusion, the UK warned: “The legitimacy of the WTO is in question, and we as Members have to respond to these challenges or it will drift into irrelevance. No-one is going to change the organization for us. We, the Members, need to drive the change.”

## Work plan

The UK has attached an annex to its proposal spelling out the elements of a “reform work plan”.

It wants MC14 “to send a clear signal that the WTO is responding to the challenges facing the global trading system but also embarking on a series of substantive reforms.”

The UK wants members to “deliver a clear statement and work plan from the Ministers at MC14. We welcome the WTO Reform Facilitator’s draft text which is a strong basis for a text that can go to Ministers to consider at MC14.”

“For the UK the work plan should:

- Be ambitious by clearly setting out that we are aiming to propose substantive reforms to Ministers at MC15.
- Be forward looking, focusing on how we move the reform discussions forward between MC14 and MC15, recognising there are a number of other documents, including the facilitator’s report, that capture the issues and divergent views of Members.
- Have clear political and capital input to the process. WTO reform will require political buy-in and strong support from capitals. The UK believes that a biennial Ministerial is not sufficient to drive progress, so we support the suggestion of an inclusive and transparent halfway checkpoint for Ministers on WTO reform.
- Be substantive. The work plan needs to be clear on the substance we will be discussing, reflecting the in-depth discussions Members have been having on reform.
- Not prejudice. We need to be clear on what is in scope without accidentally pre-empting our discussions on how we will cover these issues.
- Retain flexibility to bring in new issues as the discussions develop.
- Set out a clear approach to the work, with a clear process on how the discussions will be taken forward in Geneva.
- Have a clear timetable but not unnecessarily sequence things; we should make progress as quickly as possible on as many fronts as possible.” (*SUNS #10396*)

# US vetoes WTO reform texts amid mixed reactions from others

The United States on 5 March effectively blocked the draft World Trade Organization Reform Work Plan and the zero draft ministerial statement for the WTO's 14th ministerial conference (MC14), with several other members also raising objections, thereby deepening divisions ahead of the conference.

by D. Ravi Kanth

GENEVA: The United States on 5 March appeared to have vetoed the draft "WTO Reform Work Plan" and the zero draft ministerial statement for the World Trade Organization's 14th ministerial conference (MC14), while China, the European Union, Brazil, and the "Friends of the System" group indicated support and willingness to engage with the two documents, said people familiar with the development.

Even countries like Paraguay, India, Turkiye, and several members of the African Group raised varying levels of objections to the manner in which the facilitator constructed the two documents under his own responsibility while seemingly violating the past mandates on WTO reform as set forth in the outcome documents of the WTO's 12th ministerial conference (MC12) held in Geneva in June 2022 and the 13th ministerial conference (MC13), which concluded in Abu Dhabi on 2 March 2024, said people familiar with the development.

## US rejection

While rejecting the facilitator's two drafts – the work plan and the ministerial statement – the US is understood to have said that regardless of work plans or statements, what is needed are concrete proposals for reform after MC14.

Washington apparently maintained that it will come forward with proposals after the Yaounde meeting, while encouraging other members to do so, said people familiar with the development.

Paraguay, which had earlier tabled a paper sharply critical of the facilitator's reform proposals, seems to have suggested that while it has no problems with the evolution of the facilitator's

work plan, it cautioned that if it does not work, there should be a "Plan B" – only on procedural aspects – at this juncture, said people familiar with the development.

India is understood to have adopted a rather ambiguous position by rejecting the WTO reform proposals while informing the meeting that its capital is examining the facilitator's two proposed plans, said people familiar with the development.

Even members of the African Group apparently raised sharp objections to the two draft reform proposals submitted by the facilitator, said people familiar with the development.

## China voices support

In contrast to the apparent rejection by the US, the Chinese trade envoy, Ambassador Li Yongjie, delivered a rather measured statement of support for MFN (most-favoured-nation) treatment and several development-oriented aspects, while informing the facilitator that it can work with his two drafts.

Referring to its paper on WTO reform under the current circumstances, circulated on 18 February, China said the aim of the reform ought "to reinforce global trade governance to support economic globalization that is universally beneficial and inclusive."

"For three decades," the Chinese trade envoy said, "the WTO has been one of the cornerstones of multilateralism and a vital pillar of global economic governance."

According to China, "despite current trade tensions and global uncertainties, the WTO remains an indispensable anchor of stability. WTO reform must strengthen, not weaken, the

rules-based multilateral trading system."

Earlier, in "The President's 2026 Trade Policy Agenda – The America First Trade Policy", the US had severely criticized China for allegedly being the biggest beneficiary of the WTO, while adopting non-market trade policies.

In a similar vein, at the recent Munich Security Conference, the WTO's Director-General, Ms. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, also pointed a finger at China for utilizing special and differential treatment provisions while adopting export strategies that led to the generation of a \$1.2 trillion trade surplus.

On the "direction of the reform", China said that "the MFN principle shall remain the bedrock of the WTO. Development dimensions shall be put at the center of WTO reform."

However, this would be tantamount to challenging the US and the European Union, who are seeking to review the MFN framework.

The Chinese trade envoy said, "updating the rulebook shall include both addressing long-standing issues and exploring new and future-oriented rules."

China maintained that the "immediate priority of the reform" is "to adopt a balanced reform work plan at MC14, starting from identifying priorities for discussion post-MC14."

China appreciated "the facilitator's efforts in organizing the reform month discussions and coming up with a high-level Draft Ministerial Statement and reform work plan with delicate balance and without prejudging."

Work on "WTO reform" must address "the challenges faced by members", China said, adding that "there are the flip sides of economic globalization, including persisting North-South gap and rising domestic inequality, as elaborated in China's paper."

In China's assessment, "the WTO alone could not provide solutions to all these challenges. But we know what will not lead us to an economic globalization universally beneficial and inclusive".

Without naming the US, which has embarked on a regime of unilateral reciprocal tariffs that has been recently ruled illegal by the US Supreme Court, China said "power-based trade relations are not solutions".

Moreover, such challenges "ought to be addressed through both multilateral cooperation and domestic reform,

conducive to inclusive and sustainable development,” China said.

In contrast to the US unilateral approach to its “Make America Great Again” priorities on trade, China said that it is a strong proponent of “an open, inclusive, transparent, non-discriminatory and rules-based multilateral trading system [that] serves the interests of all and plays an important role”.

In light of the above, China stands ready to engage in constructive cooperation with all members on WTO reform issues in the run-up to, at, and beyond MC14.

In contrast to the position that Paraguay adopted on the facilitator's work plan, Brazil appears to have endorsed the facilitator's work plan, claiming that it is close to success.

Brazil also said that there are some concerns, suggesting that a work plan with substance was needed, said people familiar with the development.

### **Draft texts**

The facilitator's draft texts are as follows:

### **DRAFT YAOUNDE MINISTERIAL STATEMENT ON WTO REFORM**

We acknowledge the contribution of the WTO to the economic growth of its Members over the past 30 years and that it continues to perform valuable functions. At the same time, we acknowledge that the WTO faces serious challenges that requires meaningful reform. While we hold differing views on the challenges, we commit to work urgently and in good faith following MC14 to advance reforms, recalling MC12 and MC13. In this context, we instruct our officials to intensify their work with a view to providing concrete and substantive recommendations for action by MC15. We will undertake a mid-term review in advance of MC15 to assess progress and provide further direction.

### **WTO REFORM WORK PLAN**

#### ***Decision-Making, Development and Level Playing Field Issues – as a starting point***

Ministers note that, as a starting point, Members engaged in reform discussions leading up to MC14 that

were focused on three areas: Decision-making; Development, and Level Playing Field as reflected in the Reform Facilitator's Reports[1] and the Annex to this statement. Ministers engaged in discussions on these areas at Yaounde and agree that these three issues will continue to be a focus of work on reform post MC14.

#### ***Foundational and other issues***

Ministers also had discussions on Foundational Issues at MC14 - including systemic issues such as WTO principles and the balance of rights and obligations. Post MC14 discussions will include these issues.

#### ***Dispute Settlement***

Members acknowledge that the WTO Dispute Settlement System is not fully and well-functioning and needs to be reformed. Members agree that consultations on dispute settlement reform, under the auspices of the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB), should continue following MC14.

#### ***Modalities***

Authority: Work will be conducted under the authority of the General Council. Dispute Settlement Reform will be under the auspices of the DSB. The WTO Reform process shall be Member-driven, open, transparent, and inclusive, and address the interests of all Members.

The General Council Chair will appoint facilitators for Decision-Making, Development, and Level Playing Field issues. The WTO Reform Facilitator will lead Members' discussions on foundational issues. The facilitators will organize the work – in an inclusive manner – with the objective of building convergence based on Members' submissions and contributions.

Under the guidance of the General Council Chair, the WTO Reform Facilitator will continue to oversee and coordinate the overall process in a holistic manner, including the three initial workstreams, ensure coherence across the workstreams and avoid scheduling overlaps. The capacity constraints of Members, especially of resource-constrained delegations, will be taken into account in scheduling meetings.

Indicative Timelines/checkpoints: Work will resume in April 2026.

Progress reports to the General Council will be provided in July 2026,

December 2026, July 2027, and December 2027, with senior officials participating as necessary. Ministers will conduct a midway review ahead of MC15.

Flexibility: The Work Plan is designed to remain flexible to ensure responsiveness and institutional agility. The identification of any particular issue as a “focus” issue or an otherwise important issue will not be interpreted in any way as limiting the scope of issues Members can address in the reform process or imply any particular sequencing. Moreover, this reform process will be without prejudice to work in any WTO committee or other body.

### **ANNEX[2]**

Decision-making: determine if we need and how to: (i) rebuild trust in decision-making through a clearer understanding of the factors contributing to recurring delays in reaching consensus, (ii) improve efficiency, flexibility and outcome orientation in decision-making, and (iii) facilitate the integration of plurilateral outcomes into the WTO and consider guardrails.

Development: determine if we need and how to: (i) examine how rules can more effectively enable integration into global value chains in a manner that supports economic growth and prosperity, while ensuring appropriate policy space for industrialization, structural transformation, and economic diversification, (ii) make S&DT precise, effective, operational, and explore approaches to S&DT which better reflect the diversity of needs and levels of economic development amongst the Membership, and (iii) strengthen technical assistance and capacity building, monitoring and institutional coherence.

Level playing field (LPF) issues: determine if we need and how to: (i) identify areas for focused work and the relevant WTO rules, (ii) improve transparency, notification and compliance and, (iii) make relevant rules and disciplines more effective in addressing concerns, including distortions from state intervention in the industrial sector, as well as emerging agricultural trade issues, on separate tracks, while exploring flexibility for development policy objectives.

Key Activities:

a. Decision-making: compile

factual evidence and take stock of (i) past mandates; and (ii) tools/practices used to facilitate consensus-based decision-making; and (iii) explore if and how different decision thresholds could apply to different types of WTO decisions.

b. Development: compile and analyse information on: (i) S&DT usage, beneficiaries, effectiveness, and gaps, (ii) WTO provisions relevant to industrial development and, (iii) WTO technical assistance and capacity-building programs.

c. LPF issues: (i) map level-playing field concerns, including in the industrial sector and emerging agricultural trade issues and identify areas for focused work; (ii) identify gaps in transparency, notifications, disciplines and remedies and underlying reasons; (iii) review and assess which additional and updated rules and disciplines are needed to address identified concerns while exploring flexibility for development policy objectives.

d. Based on a-c above, determine needed reforms and develop recommendations including options for action.

Foundational and other issues: discussions will continue following MC14, based on Members' submissions and taking into account Ministers' exchanges at MC14.

Dispute Settlement Reform: consultations will continue following MC14, under the auspices of the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB).

[1] JOB/GC/483 and JOB/GC/X (March GC Report). The Facilitator's reports do not represent consensus documents but are issued under the Facilitator's responsibility.

[2] This Annex reflects discussions since January and recognizes that there are differences of views and perspectives. It is a reference guide and does not prejudice any Member's position. (SUNS #10395)

on reforms highlighted in those two ministerial outcomes.

For example, MC12, held in Geneva in June 2022, emphasized in paragraph three of the outcome document: "We acknowledge the need to take advantage of available opportunities, address the challenges that the WTO is facing, and ensure the WTO's proper functioning. We commit to work towards necessary reform of the WTO. While reaffirming the foundational principles of the WTO, we envision reforms to improve all its functions. The work shall be Member-driven, open, transparent, inclusive, and must address the interests of all Members, including development issues. The General Council and its subsidiary bodies will conduct the work, review progress, and consider decisions, as appropriate, to be submitted to the next Ministerial Conference."

In paragraph four of the MC12 outcome document, trade ministers acknowledged "the challenges and concerns with respect to the dispute settlement system including those related to the Appellate Body, recognize the importance and urgency of addressing those challenges and concerns, and commit to conduct discussions with the view to having a fully and well-functioning dispute settlement system accessible to all Members by 2024."

As regards the outcome document of MC13, held in Abu Dhabi in February-March 2024, paragraph four stated: "We reaffirm our commitment made at our Twelfth Session to work towards necessary reform of the WTO to improve all its functions and acknowledge the progress made in this regard. We note and value the work done to date to improve the daily functioning of WTO Councils, Committees and Negotiating Groups with a view to enhancing the WTO's efficiency, effectiveness, and facilitation of Members' participation in WTO work."

However, the facilitator appears to have upended the mandates of MC12 and MC13 by seemingly imposing three issues raised by the major industrialized countries, particularly to appease the US: changing the practice of consensus-based decision-making, differentiating among developing countries in the application of special and differential treatment, and addressing level-playing-field issues – none of which were part of the Geneva or Abu Dhabi mandates, said two former

## WTO reform draft declaration triggers outcry over plurilateral push

The Norwegian facilitator on 4 March issued a "draft Yaounde Ministerial Statement on WTO Reform" under his own responsibility, a move that several delegations viewed as an attempt to transform the organization into a plurilateral body that aligns with the interests of the developed countries.

by D. Ravi Kanth

GENEVA: The Norwegian facilitator overseeing the discussions on the reform of the World Trade Organization on 4 March released a "draft Yaounde Ministerial Statement on WTO Reform" under his own responsibility, in an alleged attempt to radically transform the multilateral trade organization into a plurilateral body designed to serve the interests of the industrialized countries, particularly the United States, according to people familiar with the development.

The other main purpose of the "top-down" draft agenda issued by the facilitator, Ambassador Petter Olberg of Norway, appeared to be ensuring that the unresolved mandated issues are erased once and for all, said a trade envoy who

asked not to be quoted.

At a time when the US has rejected the draft ministerial declaration on agriculture, it is incumbent on the developing countries to oppose the facilitator's draft, which will be discussed on 5 March, the trade envoy added.

Ahead of the WTO's 14th ministerial conference (MC14), scheduled to begin in Yaounde, Cameroon, on 26 March and to conclude on 29 March, the facilitator sent the draft ministerial statement to members, a copy of which was seen by the SUNS.

While the draft Yaounde Ministerial Statement recalls the "MC12 and MC13" decisions on WTO reforms, it appears to contradict the core mandates

chairs of the General Council, who asked not to be quoted.

Expressing anguish over the manner in which the facilitator allegedly hijacked the mandates of MC12 and MC13, the two chairs said on background basis that developing countries must now decide whether they want the centrality of the multilateral trading framework, as enshrined in the Marrakesh Agreement, to be preserved and safeguarded from the assault of the industrialized countries.

“In this context,” the facilitator asked trade ministers gathering for MC14 to instruct their officials “to intensify their work with a view to providing concrete and substantive recommendations for action by MC15.”

Effectively, the facilitator is telling trade ministers to launch a new “reform” round of trade negotiations while dismantling the mandated issues and the existing Doha work program – an approach the US echoed on 3 March during the agriculture negotiations by criticizing the chair for including a line on mandated issues in his draft agriculture declaration, said a trade envoy who asked not to be quoted.

The facilitator has informed members about undertaking “a mid-term review in advance of MC15 to assess progress and provide further direction”.

### **Reform Work Plan**

Under the sub-title “WTO Reform Work Plan,” the facilitator states: “Decision-making, Development and Level Playing Field issues – as a starting point Ministers note that Members engaged in reform discussions leading up to MC14 that were focused on three areas: Decision-making; Development; and Level Playing Field, as reflected in the Reform Facilitator’s Reports (one issued in December 2025 relating to Job/GC/483 and the other to be issued shortly) and the Annex to this statement.”

The facilitator wants trade ministers at MC14 to declare that they “engaged in discussions on these areas at Yaounde and agree that these three issues will continue to be a focus of work on reform post-MC14”.

Trade envoys privately expressed alarm over what the facilitator is asking their ministers to endorse, given that these three reform issues were never agreed upon with such specificity in the MC12 and MC13 mandates.

Ambassador Olberg seems determined to fence off the three issues from all others, ensuring no linkage with “foundational and other issues” or dispute settlement – as such linkage would be unacceptable to the US, said a senior capital-based African official who asked not to be quoted.

In all previous eight rounds of trade negotiations, contracting parties in GATT outlined give-and-take objectives. But the negotiations on reforms are being turned into a proverbial “my way or the highway” framework, said trade envoys, who asked not to be quoted.

On “Foundational and other issues,” the facilitator’s draft ministerial statement states: “Ministers also had discussions on Foundational Issues at MC14 – including systemic issues such as WTO principles and the balance of rights and obligations. Post-MC14 discussions will include these issues.”

However, Ambassador Olberg did not explain why the foundational issues cannot be integrated into his reform agenda alongside the three core issues, the official said.

On dispute settlement, the draft states: “Members acknowledge that the WTO Dispute Settlement System is not fully and well-functioning and needs to be reformed. Members agree that consultations on dispute settlement reform, under the auspices of the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB), should continue following MC14.”

The level of specificity and importance attached to the three issues – decision-making, development, and level-playing field issues – while devaluing the foundational issues, dispute settlement reform, and the unresolved mandated issues, clearly indicates that the WTO could be transformed into a plurilateral organization. This contradicts the vision set out by African trade ministers in their Maputo Declaration for MC14 issued last week, the official said.

### **Modalities**

The facilitator outlined the roadmap for the reform discussions between MC14 and MC15.

The draft states: “Work will be conducted under the authority of the General Council. Dispute Settlement Reform will be under the auspices of the DSB. The WTO Reform process shall be Member-driven, open, transparent, and

inclusive, and address the interests of all Members.”

Yet, until now, the preparatory work on WTO reforms has not been carried out through a bottom-up, member-driven framework. If anything, all three issues were imposed by key industrialized countries, along with a middle-group of countries known as the “Friends of the System”, and were not proposed by developing country or LDC coalitions, said several trade envoys who asked not to be quoted.

The facilitator states in his draft that “the General Council Chair will appoint facilitators for Decision-Making, Development, and Level Playing Field issues. The WTO Reform Facilitator will lead Members’ discussions on foundational issues. The facilitators will organize the work – in an inclusive manner – with the objective of building convergence based on Members’ submissions and contributions.”

Ambassador Olberg adds: “Under the guidance of the General Council Chair, the WTO Reform Facilitator will continue to oversee and coordinate the overall process in a holistic manner, including the three initial workstreams, ensure coherence across the workstreams and avoid scheduling overlaps. The capacity constraints of Members, especially of resource-constrained delegations, will be taken into account in scheduling meetings.”

During the recent spate of discussions, the General Council chair was apparently not involved in the reform work, said a trade envoy who asked not to be quoted.

Ambassador Olberg also proposed unusually detailed “Indicative Timelines/checkpoints,” suggesting that “work will resume in April 2026” and that “progress reports to the General Council will be provided in July 2026, December 2026, July 2027, and December 2027, with senior officials participating as necessary. Ministers will conduct a midway review ahead of MC15.”

The facilitator said as part of flexibility, “the Work Plan is designed to remain flexible to ensure responsiveness and institutional agility. The identification of any particular issue as a “focus” issue or an otherwise important issue will not be interpreted in any way as limiting the scope of issues Members can address in the reform process or imply any particular sequencing. Moreover, this reform process will be without prejudice to work in any WTO committee or other body.” (SUNS #10394)

# AU challenges WTO reform agenda backed by industrialized nations

At the close of their 26 February summit in Maputo, Mozambique, African Union (AU) trade ministers finalized a blueprint that asserts Africa's collective position ahead of the World Trade Organization's 14th ministerial conference (MC14) in Yaounde, Cameroon.

by D. Ravi Kanth

GENEVA: At the end of their two-day summit in Maputo, Mozambique, on 26 February, African Union (AU) trade ministers finalized a blueprint challenging the World Trade Organization Director-General's backing of a WTO reform agenda that they argue is being forced by the major industrialized countries, said people familiar with the development.

The document directly challenges the positions taken by the DG, Ms. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who, on 25 February, apparently supported the reforms proposed by the Norwegian facilitator on changing the practice of consensus-based decision-making, differentiating among developing countries on special and differential treatment (S&DT), and "level-playing field" issues, according to a senior African official who requested anonymity.

In what she characterized as an alleged violation of her status as an international civil servant under the provisions of the Marrakesh Agreement, Ms. Okonjo-Iweala reportedly urged African trade ministers in Maputo not to oppose the proposed reforms, despite concerns that they could undermine the multilateral framework.

Her stance seemingly aligned with the United States, the European Union, Japan, and the so-called "Friends of the System" group, and was reinforced by 145 business lobbies from major industrialized countries calling for a "time-bound reform round" to change the consensus principle and to enable plurilateral negotiations at the WTO.

Against this backdrop, African Union trade ministers issued the Maputo Ministerial Declaration on 26 February.

## Maputo Declaration

The preamble to the declaration acknowledges that "the multilateral

trading system, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in particular, is facing a profound systemic crisis, reflected in persistent negotiating paralysis, unresolved development issues, weakened enforcement mechanisms, growing unilateralism, protectionism, fragmentation, marginalization of developing country priorities, and the erosion of trust among Members."

The systemic crisis stems largely from the United States, both in the WTO negotiations and through its unilateral reciprocal tariffs allegedly in violation of MFN treatment and the scheduled binding commitments under the Marrakesh Agreement, according to several trade envoys who asked not to be quoted.

The declaration notes that "developing countries, including African countries and Least Developed Countries (LDCs), have consistently called for meaningful reform of the WTO since the conclusion of the Uruguay Round, in order to correct historical imbalances and ensure that the system delivers equitable development outcomes."

With African members "representing the largest constituency within the WTO," the declaration states that they "cannot remain peripheral in shaping its reform and future direction, and that a multilateral trading system that fails to address the interests, priorities and development realities of its largest constituency is neither sustainable nor credible, and that meaningful reform is therefore not optional but urgent."

## PRIORITY ISSUES

The declaration identifies several priority issues including WTO reform; development and special and differential treatment (S&DT); agriculture; electronic commerce; WTO accession;

LDC graduation; and the African Union's observer status at the WTO.

On the foundational issues, the ministers in their declaration reiterated "the WTO's core principles – including MFN, consensus-based decision-making, transparency, non-discrimination, and inclusivity as foundational", while stressing "Africa's long-standing calls for reform since the Uruguay Round to address systemic biases against developing countries."

They stated that "the legitimacy and effectiveness of the WTO rest on respect for its agreed rules, principles and institutional balance, and that erosion of these foundations undermines confidence in the system, particularly among developing countries."

They recalled "the unfulfilled mandates from previous Ministerial Conferences, urging their prioritization to restore credibility and balance in agenda-setting."

On the issue of WTO reform, the ministers stated that WTO reform "must take into account the long-standing concerns of developing countries contained in the Doha Development Agenda, improve the functioning of the WTO to make it more inclusive, and should preserve and safeguard its core principles as enshrined in the Marrakesh Agreement."

They acknowledged "that the WTO is at a critical juncture, confronting a crisis of relevance, legitimacy, effectiveness, erosion of trust, and paralysis of its dispute settlement system that threatens its ability to respond to contemporary global challenges and to support the development aspirations of its Members, particularly developing countries and LDCs."

The ministers reiterated "that Africa's engagement with the multilateral trading system has always been anchored in the pursuit of a fair, predictable and development-oriented rules-based framework, while RECOGNIZING that the existing system has fallen short in delivering balanced outcomes and correcting historical inequities."

Therefore, they said that "WTO reform must be member-driven, inclusive, transparent and development-centered, and must not entrench existing asymmetries or legitimize exclusionary approaches to agenda-setting, negotiations or decision-making."

They added: "A system that fails

to address the interests of its largest constituency – developing countries – cannot endure.”

Reform efforts “must restore balance across the three core functions of the WTO – negotiation, monitoring and dispute settlement – and must address long-standing development issues with the same urgency afforded to emerging and new trade topics.”

The ministers called for “the urgent and unconditional restoration of a fully functional, two-tier, binding dispute settlement system, accessible to all Members, as a cornerstone of legal certainty and protection against unilateral and coercive trade measures, particularly for developing countries with limited economic leverage.”

They pressed for “balance in the reform agenda, negotiations and outcomes, ensuring that institutional and procedural reforms go hand in hand with outcomes on substance – particularly in areas of development, agriculture, and industrialization,” while cautioning that “reform processes that continue to defer or dilute development priorities risk further weakening confidence in the multilateral trading system.”

Reaffirming “the centrality of the Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) principle as a foundational pillar of multilateralism,” they cautioned “against practices that fragment the system, weaken multilateral disciplines or marginalize non-participating Members.”

On development and S&DT, the ministers underscored that “Special and Differential Treatment is a core principle and remains a permanent right of developing countries and least developed countries (LDCs) in the multilateral trading system.”

Stating that “S&DT is a structural necessity, not a temporary concession,” they demanded “that WTO reform deliver concrete outcomes that make S&DT provisions more precise, effective and operational,” and called for “preserving policy space for industrialization, food security and economic diversification.”

They further called for strengthening “the WTO’s deliberative function in order to address systemic imbalances, including technology transfer, industrial policy space, debt and trade linkages, climate-related trade measures and global value chain concentration”.

“This should be done in a manner consistent with Members’ development levels, particularly in relation to the

transfer of environmentally sound technologies to developing and least developed countries, while adhering to WTO principles and the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC).”

On the issue of decision-making, the ministers reaffirmed that “consensus-based decision-making remains a cornerstone of the WTO and a critical safeguard for the interests of developing countries,” while calling “for reforms that strengthen inclusivity, transparency and effective participation of all Members, particularly African countries and LDCs, in agenda-setting, negotiations and outcomes”.

They pressed for “member-driven, consensus-based decision-making that prevents domination by few and ensures Africa’s voice as the WTO’s largest constituency shapes outcomes.”

The ministers emphatically reaffirmed that “Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT) [is] a non-negotiable foundational principle of the multilateral trading system, aimed at correcting structural inequalities and facilitating development.”

They called for placing “development at the heart of WTO reform, and that S&DT is an essential tool for addressing structural inequalities within the multilateral trading system”.

They stated that “reform outcomes must deliver tangible development outcomes, including enhanced policy space, industrialization prospects, and food security for developing countries.”

According to the declaration, the ministers “reject reform approaches that dilute, reinterpret or condition S&DT in ways that undermine its purpose or effectiveness”, and “reject any attempt to condition access to S&DT on arbitrary differentiation, income thresholds or self-designation approaches that ignore structural vulnerabilities and development realities.”

They called for adopting “without further delay, of the G90 proposals to operationalize S&DT provisions across WTO Agreements” and demanded “a reinvigoration of the Committee on Trade and Development to monitor, evaluate, and guide implementation of S&DT provisions in all negotiations and agreements”.

On level-playing field issues, the ministers argued that “the concept of a “level playing field” cannot be detached from historical context, development disparities and asymmetries in economic

capacity”.

They emphasized that “genuine fairness in global trade requires addressing entrenched imbalances in rules and outcomes, including in agriculture, domestic support, subsidies, technology transfer, and market access, to create equitable conditions for African exporters and producers”.

The ministers cautioned “against the use of ‘level playing field’ narratives to justify constraints on legitimate development policies of developing countries”.

## AGRICULTURE

On agriculture, the ministers stated that “agriculture and its related food systems are the backbone of African economies and remain the vital sector of African economies, essential for economic growth, food security, rural development, job creation and poverty reduction in the continent”.

They reiterated their “deep concern about the historical imbalances and the persistent trade-distortive use of inequitable AMS entitlements, the Blue and Green Boxes which harm the competitiveness of African producers, fosters market concentration, and discourage production and diversification across Africa”.

They called for “a clear roadmap and timelines for the delivery of a permanent solution on public stockholding on or before MC15, with appropriate safeguard mechanisms in order to enable African Countries to implement strategies aimed at bolstering domestic agricultural production and achieving food security, particularly for poor and marginalized population in Africa”.

The ministers demanded that “priority be given to work aimed at reaching an effective and operational Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM) for developing countries, enabling them to protect their local markets against import surges or price volatility which threatens the livelihoods of farmers, impacts investment decisions and ultimately affects food security”.

On cotton, they called for “a ministerial mandate to advance the specific discussions agreed upon in the Hong Kong, Bali and Nairobi decisions on cotton, and to achieve concrete results before MC15”.

The ministers called for “disciplining trade-distorting domestic support, in particular additional AMS entitlements and prioritizing work

towards reaching an outcome on Domestic Support that integrates special and differential treatment including the preservation of Article 6.2 support for low-income and resource-poor farmers by MC15”.

**DEVELOPMENT**

On development, the ministers emphasized “the need for the reform of WTO rules that constrain policy space to promote industrialization, which is now more essential than ever due to an increase in vulnerabilities on the African continent and in other developing countries and recall the Africa Group proposals submitted in this regard (WT/CG/W/868,G/C/W/825; WT/GC/W/880; WT/GC/W/883,WGTTT/W/34/Rev1, WT/GC/W/896)”.

They reaffirmed “that preserving this policy space is critical to supporting African countries in their transition away from dependence on primary commodities, without violating WTO rules”.

The ministers said that “trade in services is a pillar of Africa’s structural transformation driving competitiveness including through enhanced continental market access, growth of services exports, development of regional value chains, digital and knowledge-based industries, and emphasize that the GATS must be implemented in a manner that supports development and preserves policy space”.

They said that “reducing the cost of remittance transfers is a critical lever to foster shared prosperity and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, and express our commitment to continue working to advance this issue within the WTO”.

On the E-commerce moratorium, the ministers expressed “concerns regarding the development implications of the WTO moratorium on customs duties applicable to electronic transmissions, particularly the potential loss of customs revenue that is vital for financing development initiatives”.

They urged “a comprehensive assessment of the impact of this moratorium on the economies of African countries”.

**DISPUTE SETTLEMENT**

The ministers reiterated “Africa’s long-standing position that a fully functional, two-tier, binding dispute settlement system is indispensable to the

credibility of the WTO.”

According to the ministers, any reformed dispute settlement system “must preserve the independence of adjudicators, ensure legal certainty, and remain accessible and effective for all

Members, including those with limited capacity”.

They called for “the expeditious conclusion of dispute settlement reform in line with written submissions and ideas by several Members.” (SUNS #10390)

## Battles in the WTO

### Negotiations and Outcomes of the WTO Ministerial Conferences

by *Martin Khor*

The World Trade Organisation has been an extremely controversial and divided organisation ever since its establishment in 1995. The big battles are most evident at its highest governing body, the Ministerial Conference, where the Trade Ministers of member states convene to chart the WTO’s course.

This book is a compilation of contemporaneous reports and analyses of what unfolded at each Ministerial, as well as a few “mini-Ministerials”, that took place from the WTO’s inception up to 2017. As these articles reveal, the Ministerials have been the stage on which battles over the future direction of the WTO are most prominently played out. These clashes have mainly pitted developed member states pushing to expand the WTO’s ambit into new subject areas, against many developing countries which call instead for redressing imbalances in the existing set of WTO rules.

This book also shines a light on the murky decision-making methods often employed during Ministerials, where agreements are sought to be hammered out by a select few delegations behind closed doors before being foisted on the rest of the membership. Such exclusionary processes, coupled with the crucial substantive issues at stake, have led to dramatic outcomes in many a Ministerial.

The ringside accounts of Ministerial battles collected here offer important insights into the contested dynamics of the WTO and the multilateral trading system in general.



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