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WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION

Trade talks off to shaky start

Members of the World Trade Organization met to negotiate a long-delayed global trade treaty but were split over issues.

By Jane Wardell

Associated Press

GENEVA - The squabbling began even before the talks did.

The world's most powerful trading nations gathering Thursday to hammer out a long-delayed global trade treaty spent most of the first day finger-pointing -- leaving little apparent hope of a breakthrough when official talks begin today.

Following meetings of key negotiating blocs, developing countries accused rich nations of shirking their duties, while the Europeans were split over cuts to farm tariffs.

'GAPS HAVE WIDENED'

"Somehow the gaps don't seem to diminish," Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said of the differences that have put the Doha round of trade talks two years behind schedule.

"If anything, if I look backward, maybe to two or three months ago, . . . I have the impression that the gaps have widened, or at least become more rigid," Amorim told reporters after a meeting of the G-20 group of developing nations.

More than 60 ministers are meeting in Geneva over the next few days in a bid to reach an agreement that the World Trade Organization says could add billions of dollars to the global economy and lift millions of people out of poverty.

It is the largest WTO gathering since a failed conference in Hong Kong in December.

"It is very obvious we have reached a critical stage of negotiations," European Union trade chief Peter Mandelson said. "This isn't now the time for bluffing or brinkmanship."

Other leaders agreed, but only the European Union seemed ready to make some concessions -- and that overture was rejected by some countries under its own umbrella.

'IMPROVE OUR OFFER'

Mandelson said the 25-nation bloc was "prepared, if the circumstances are right, significantly to improve our offer in agriculture market access, moving towards and close to what the G-20 have asked for."

But French Trade Minister Christine Lagarde said Mandelson was not authorized at an EU meeting earlier Thursday to improve upon Europe's existing offer of a 39 percent cut in allowed levels of farm tariffs -- below the 54 percent demanded by the G-20, led by Brazil and India.

"It would be a major error to suggest a further opening in market access," French Agriculture Minister Dominique Bussereau said.

Austrian Agriculture Minister Josef Proell said moving toward the proposal of the G-20, "is not possible for EU farmers." Austria holds the EU presidency.

Brussels does not need a formal mandate from member states to negotiate on trade issues, and France could only block a deal after it was put to the WTO's members for ratification -- but the division does not bode well for the start of formal talks today.

India and Brazil criticized wealthy countries for ignoring the Doha round of talks, named for the Qatari capital where they were launched in 2001, were established specifically to address the needs of developing countries.

The European Union and United States have both said further cutbacks in farm support programs were dependent on developing countries opening up their markets to foreign competition in industries and services.

Associated Press writer Bradley S. Klapper contributed to this report.