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TRADE

Negotiators call for FTAA talks

Mexico wants to settle the future of the temporary secretariat for the languishing Free Trade Area of the Americas talks. Caribbean negotiators call for more serious discussions.

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Mexico got the ball rolling when it asked regional trade negotiators to meet in Puebla on Thursday to discuss what to do about the secretariat set up to handle hemispheric trade negotiations that have been moribund for the past 18 months.

Then Caribbean trade officials took the proposal a step further, urging that the administrative meeting also consider the possibility of restarting negotiations to form a Free Trade Area of the Americas.

"There should be an informal 'mini senior officials' meeting on the margins of the Puebla meeting to enable a process of reflection and discussion on the possible way forward," said Richard Bernal, director general of the Caribbean Regional Negotiating Machinery, which negotiates trade accords for the region.

'ROAD MAP' NEEDED

Bernal said that negotiators should look at the technical and political hurdles to restarting talks and a new "road map" that would guide negotiators toward conclusion of the negotiations.

A representative from the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, the U.S. agency in charge of negotiating trade agreements, will attend the Puebla meeting, according to USTR spokeswoman Neena Moorjani.

Moorjani said the USTR was studying the Caribbean proposal.

There was no immediate word over whether Brazil -- which is at odds with the United States over what should be on the table at FTAA talks -- would send a representative.

Puebla is the site of the current FTAA headquarters and was the location of the last full meeting of FTAA negotiators in February 2004. Since then Mexico, as well as the Inter-American Development Bank, the Organization of American States and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean have continued to fund the Puebla operation, which is staffed by a skeleton crew.

Miami is among the cities vying for a permanent FTAA secretariat if talks can get back on track and an agreement becomes a reality.

BRAZIL'S IMPORTANCE

The breakdown of the attempt to negotiate a trade and investment agreement among 34 countries in the hemisphere centers on the disagreement between the United States and Brazil. Washington wants new investment rules and protections for intellectual property to be part of the negotiations -- which Brazil is against -- while Brasilia wants greater access for its agricultural products. Washington insists that issue be negotiated at global talks.

All attempts to get the talks back on track have failed so far.

Meanwhile Washington has concentrated on small trade agreements with Central America and the Dominican Republic, and is still negotiating with Panama and the Andean nations of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.