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HONG KONG

## WTO delegates expect unproductive summit

Impasse over farm trade makes for a bleak outlook as trade delegates gather in Hong Kong.

BY SAM CAGE

Associated Press

**HONG KONG** - An impasse between rich and poor nations over farm trade threatens to undermine progress at this week's World Trade Organization meeting, trade ministers said Monday as delegates from 149 countries gathered to work toward an eventual global treaty that would cut trade barriers.

The meeting in this Asian citadel of free trade was meant to wrap up the so-called "Doha round" of WTO negotiations, which were kicked off in 2001 in Qatar's capital to pay particular attention to poor nations' trade concerns.

But developing nations say the U.S., EU and other rich economies have failed to deliver on that commitment given their reluctance to cut agricultural tariffs and farm subsidies, blocking poor countries' access to those lucrative markets.

"Now it is clear that unless a miracle occurs -- and I'm not even sure what kind of miracle -- we won't have a final deal . . . in Hong Kong," Brazil's foreign minister, Celso Amorim, told reporters on Monday.

### ACCUSATIONS

Amorim accused the wealthy industrialized nations of sacrificing the interests of 70 percent of the developing world -- farmers barely getting by -- for the sake of a tiny segment of their own populations.

"Who are the farmers of France? It's the people who own little farms and make Camembert cheese or who sell Bordeaux," he said.

For poor countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa, selling exports of commodities like grain and sugar to the industrialized world are the key to economic growth and development, Amorim said.

EU trade chief Peter Mandelson, however, bluntly said that progress was "not possible" in Hong Kong unless poorer nations themselves offered to lower their trade barriers to foreign manufactured goods and services.

"There's simply too little on the table to negotiate about in Hong Kong," Mandelson told reporters Monday morning, reiterating that the EU would not move beyond the average 46 percent cut in farm tariffs it offered in October until other countries make counter-offers.

He said that delegates should try to narrow differences during the Hong Kong meeting so that an outline for a trade deal can be drawn up by the first quarter of 2006.

Eager to show progress, the EU and other wealthy nations urged the WTO to approve a package of trade measures for helping 32 of the WTO's poorest members.

Japan has already drawn up an elaborate initiative to achieve those goals, and reaction from other members to the move has been very positive, said Shoichi Nakagawa, minister of agriculture, forestry and fisheries.

Mandelson also praised Japan, and suggested the proposal be at the top of the WTO's agenda when talks officially start Tuesday.

But Monday evening, it was clear the horse-trading had already begun.

Trade ministers from six key nations -- the EU, U.S., India, Brazil, Japan and Australia -- met privately in a Hong Kong hotel. Asked as he entered the hotel if he had received any new offers, Mandelson said: "There's always new offers."

U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman, also heading into the meeting at a Hong Kong hotel, said, "I hope for some progress tonight."

### **DRAMATIC PROTESTS**

With up to 10,000 protesters planning to hit the streets to voice opposition to the WTO and other symbols of globalization, Hong Kong authorities set up elaborate security precautions, blocking off access to roads near the conference site, setting up barricades and even gluing bricks onto the sidewalks.

South Korean activists, known for engaging in fierce battles with riot police and for dramatic gestures including committing suicide to highlight their causes, warned they planned to escalate their protests as the WTO meeting progresses.

Though the talks are taking place in one of the world's wealthiest cities, the stakes are highest for the world's poorest, the billions of people living in the developing world whose survival is threatened by unfair trade policies, critics say.

"The WTO is not about free trade, it is about fair trade. And fair trade means a level-playing field," said Indian Commerce Minister Kamal Nath.

Wealthy nations should concede more because poor countries have not benefited much from previous trade talks, said Don McKinnon, secretary-general of the Commonwealth, a group of 53 countries formerly belonging to the British Empire that represents 30 percent of the world's population.