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U.S. and India Exchange Barbs at MC11 Opening Session

In what was seen as a rather positive speech, the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), Robert Lighthizer, reminded Members of the importance of the World Trade Organization (WTO) for global trade.

"It does an enormous amount of good, and provides a helpful negotiating forum for Contracting Parties," the USTR said during the opening plenary session of the organization's 11th Ministerial Conference (MC11) held in Buenos Aires on December 11.

However, the institution, he added, poses serious challenges starting with Members' focus on WTO's current litigation structure, which, according to Lighthizer, is casting shadow over the organization's essential negotiating pillar. "We have to ask ourselves whether this is good for the institution and whether the current litigation structure makes sense," Lighthizer stressed.

The USTR also called for the a distinction to be made among "self-proclaimed" developing countries as "five of the six richest countries in the world presently claim developing country status," and thus would benefit from special and differential treatments reserved to poorer nations. "There is something wrong with this," the USTR added, clearly referring to the likes of China and other so-called emerging countries that have benefited from global trade over the past decade. Lighthizer also advocated for greater notifications and transparency as "some Members are intentionally circumventing these obligations."

The U.S. looks for the WTO to help make markets more efficient by "revitalizing the standing bodies to ensure they are focused on new challenges, such as chronic overcapacity and the influence of state-owned enterprises," the USTR claimed.

Many delegates described the tone of the speech as more positive than expected. Others even shared some of the U.S.'s concerns, particularly with the need to differentiate among developing countries. India though is not among those countries. It called the full Membership "to re-endorse the centrality of development in WTO negotiations without creating new sub-categories of countries."

It went on to repeat its demands for the MC11, saying that it cannot envisage any negotiated outcome at MC11 without a permanent solution on the issue of public stockholding for food security purposes for which Members have a ministerial mandate and which represents "a matter of survival for eight hundred million hungry and undernourished people in the world."

India's Commerce Minister said he expects developed countries' aggregate measure of support (AMS) to be first and foremost addressed in a post-MC11 work programme. India is also looking to pursue the work undertaken on fisheries subsidies towards reaching an agreement by the WTO's 12th Ministerial Conference in 2019. However, it warned against shifting the focus to new issues – instead of the unfinished Doha agenda – claiming that Members have no mandate to address new topics such investment facilitation and micro-small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs).

"At a time when the global trade environment is extremely fragile, let this Ministerial Conference be an occasion for concluding the unfinished agenda of

the Doha Work Programme, and collectively strive to preserve and revitalize the WTO," India's Commerce Minister concluded.

Geneva Watch is published by Dairy Farmers of Canada, Chicken Farmers of Canada, Egg Farmers of Canada, Turkey Farmers of Canada and Canadian Hatching Egg Producers to report on the various events occurring in Geneva, particularly on the WTO negotiations on agriculture.

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