

Apec leaders agree ban on trade barriers

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The Financial Times

Published: November 25 2008 02:00 | Last updated: November 25 2008 02:00

Leaders of 21 Pacific rim economies have agreed a 12-month ban on erecting new trade barriers and have pledged to advance the Doha round of trade negotiations within a month.

In a strong endorsement of the consensus reached in Washington by the Group of 20, leaders of the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) group said that they were intensifying their engagement with the World Trade Organisation to advance the Doha round.

"We are committed to reaching agreement on modalities next month on the basis of progress made to date," the leaders said at the close of the Apec summit, George W. Bush's last international meeting as US president.

"We and our ministers are intensifying our engagement with WTO counterparts to create the convergence necessary to achieve this outcome."

Separately, the chance of ministers meeting next month to push forward the Doha round of trade talks increased on Sunday after diplomats said they had made progress on setting goals for the negotiations.

After talks at the WTO in Geneva, Peter Allgeier, the US representative, said: "I think there is a very high probability of a meeting." Such a gathering would in effect be one of the very last chances to agree an outline deal in the seven-year-old talks before Mr Bush leaves office in January.

Last week a coalition of US and European business representatives wrote to Susan Schwab, US trade representative, and Catherine Ashton, EU trade commissioner, warning against a rushed ministerial meeting that did not deliver substantial new export markets.

In particular, business leaders have demanded that so-called sectorals, which will open up manufacturing sectors to international competition, be agreed with the big emerging markets including India and China.

But Kamal Nath, the Indian trade minister, who is campaigning for state elections in his home state of Madhya Pradesh, said developing countries would not be bounced into making such agreements.

"I support a ministerial meeting if there is a real attempt by the developed countries to make concessions," he told the Financial Times.

"If they insist on trying to lock in sectorals I don't see that possibility."