

Asia-Pacific ministers reject protectionism, vow trade

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LIMA, Peru (AFP) — Twenty-one Asia-Pacific economies making up half of world commerce made a plea Thursday against protectionism and urged a quick breakthrough in global trade talks to beat the financial crisis.

Trade and foreign ministers met for two days of in-depth talks in Peru's capital Lima seeking a formula to tear down tariff walls -- the key roadblock in global trade negotiations -- by year end.

The push to resurrect the so-called Doha round of World Trade Organization (WTO) talks comes despite rising criticism of globalization in some quarters, as the world economy suffers its worst crisis since the Great Depression.

"We will stand firm against any protectionist sentiment arising out of this crisis," the ministers of the 21-member Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum said in a joint statement.

The ministers were laying the groundwork for a weekend leaders' summit which is the last scheduled foreign trip for outgoing US President George W. Bush.

The ministers pledged to work to resolve the key WTO sticking point of tariff barriers by the end of December, paving the way for an elusive global trade pact.

"A strong agreement would demonstrate the ability of the international community to work together to bolster a deteriorating global economy," the joint statement said.

Leftist workers plan to meet Bush on his arrival Friday with protests blaming him for setting off the global economic crisis by championing free trade.

Bush's successor, Barack Obama, backs free trade but has criticized US deals with some APEC members as harmful to US workers. US unemployment claims soared to a 16-year high, government data showed Thursday.

Susan Schwab, the outgoing US trade representative, said that world leaders learned the lessons of the Great Depression.

"We all brought lessons from what happened in the 1930s when the United States and other countries took the wrong approach by raising barriers" and "ended up deepening it," she said.

Foreign Minister Alejandro Foxley of Chile said "we are simply running out of time" to show the potential of free trade.

"We can produce excellent news on the financial crisis if we have a Doha agreement in the next couple of months," he told reporters.

"We can also provide an excuse for those pushing for protectionism if we don't get the Doha round done."

Free trade talks collapsed in July due to acrimony between rich and developing countries -- particularly the United States and India -- on how far to go in protecting poor farmers from the globalized economy.

The APEC ministers called on their leaders, including Bush and Chinese President Hu Jintao, to demonstrate "political support for reaching an ambitious and balanced conclusion" to the latest round of global trade talks, launched in the Qatari capital Doha in November 2001.

Amid the breakdown in WTO talks, regional nations have increasingly been inking bilateral free-trade deals.

Chinese President Hu Jintao , who was welcomed Wednesday with a parade through the heart of Lima, wrapped up negotiations on a free trade deal with Peru, the latest such pact for China.

Hu told a breakfast meeting with business leaders that China was interested in Peru's mines and promised that Beijing's economic fundamentals were still strong despite the global slowdown.

"We can overcome these difficulties and manage to maintain fast but stable economic growth," Hu said.

The APEC Summit comes just a week after leaders of 20 major developing and industrialized states met in Washington and announced a series of actions to stabilize the economic system and stimulate growth.

The APEC ministers said they "strongly support" the Group of 20 plan.