

Leaders push for progress in Doha meeting

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

After a meeting at the World Trade Organisation in Geneva, Peter Allgeier, US representative at the WTO, said there was “a very high probability” of a meeting.

Such a gathering would in effect be one of the last chances to agree an outline deal in the seven-year-old talks before President George W. Bush leaves office in January.

Separately, heads of government at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation meeting in Peru issued a statement directing ministers to meet in Geneva to revive the Doha round, saying they expected an “ambitious and balanced” result.

But some observers and participants stressed that stark divisions remained among different participants and lobbies in the talks.

Last week, a coalition of American 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 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.”