

Bleak prospects at WTO

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BIJAN LAL DEV

At the ongoing World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations, the stakes are high for all those involved. WTO members have expressed a strong commitment towards both the Doha Development Round (DDR) that was launched in 2001 and the Hong Kong (HK) Ministerial Conference that was initiated in 2005. Unfortunately, however, despite their efforts, it is evident that a lot more time will be required in order to reach conclusive decisions and agreements.

When negotiations were on the verge of collapse in 2005, the Hong Kong committee of the WTO decided to establish modalities. These modalities were intended to phase out all forms of agricultural export subsidies, make cuts on tariffs placed on agricultural products, reduce trade-distorting domestic support, and make industrial products more accessible.

Finally, the committee aimed to ensure that the Regional Trade Agreement (RTA) Transparency Mechanism reached an agreement by April 20, 2006. That deadline was not met. The next deadline for submitting a comprehensive draft of a schedule based on these modalities is July 31. Regrettably, the formal and informal parleys that have been taking place around the world along with a series of conferences in Geneva have thus far amounted to nothing but "futile efforts."

There are three identifiable areas of divergence of opinion amongst the members that are preventing negotiations from advancing smoothly. Firstly, there is the question of exactly how much of a tariff reduction is necessary for agricultural products. In this case, the European Union (EU) should be the main respondent, as they have been imposing high tariffs along with innumerable non-tariff barriers. The EU has offered to eliminate export subsidies completely by 2013, in accordance with the HK Declaration.

According to Peter Mandelson, the EU Trade Commissioner, the EU proposes to cut 60% of all tariffs in the highest bracket and will maintain 8% of its tariff lines on sensitive products. They aim to fulfill this goal by 2010. However, most other members, such as the G-20 and the Cairns Group including Australia and New Zealand, insist that they begin as early as 2008 and that they complete 70% of the project by 2010.

Several WTO members also have certain reservations concern-

ing the proposal itself. They have realized that as per the EU proposal, the EU will reduce agriculture tariffs by an average of 38-39% with 142 sensitive product tariff lines. This would be similar to awarding duty-free and quota-free market access by the WTO members to 97% of products originating from LDCs. The EU, the US, Japan, and Canada have more than 10,000 tariff lines. Out of these 3%, i.e., more than 300 tariff lines will remain outside the so-called gracious market access facility for poor countries.

Bangladesh, the biggest exporter among LDCs, has been exporting products and services covering 200-230 tariff lines. Thus the developed and stronger developing countries could easily avoid providing duty-free and quota-free entry to any product of Bangladesh by keeping 300 items of its interest away from the facility. The other 49 LDCs, of which 31 are WTO members, could view these decisions as even more useless, since most of them have products covering less than 100 export tariff lines. In agriculture also, Brazil, China, India, South Africa and other promising exporters of agro-products do not have exporting capacity that exceeds 100 tariff lines.

Therefore, if they agreed with the EU tariff-cut proposal, it would not bring them any benefit, as the EU could maintain its current high tariffs on 142 tariff lines. The only achievement that would be made through present negotiations is that members would agree to cut tariffs by a general reduction formula that would replace the average tariff cuts mandated by the Uruguay Round Agreement in 1994. This shift will help to cut high tariffs by a larger margin and lower tariffs by lesser margins.

Secondly, a magnitude of agricultural subsidies reduction is needed to establish a level playing field. The developed and more developing countries have been maintaining both export and domestic subsidies, which severely distort fair trade. US farmers and exporters are being provided an incentive of one-dollar cash bonuses for every dollar worth of agricultural production. Members of WTO from developing nations urged the members from more developed nations to phase out all forms of export subsidies and to carry out a substantial reduction in trade-distorting domestic support, which is estimated to amount to one billion dollars every day across the developed world.

In HK, the WTO members agreed in Final Bound Total Aggregate

Measurement of Support that there would be three bands for reductions on domestic support. There would also be trade-distorting domestic support with higher linear cuts in higher bands. In both cases, the member with the highest level of permitted support will be in the top band. The other two members with the second and third highest levels of support will be in the middle band and all other members, including all members of developing countries, will be in the bottom band. Since the US is in the top band, it will have to cut subsidies more. However, the US has proposed to cut domestic and export subsidies on an unquantified basis sometime in the future. Australia, Canada, Japan, and New Zealand also did not propose sufficient cuts, which aggravated the EU.

Thirdly, in order to increase market access of industrial goods, larger cuts in tariffs on industrial products are required. In this case, industrial economies including the US, EU, and Japan want emerging developing countries -- Brazil, China, India, and South Africa -- to seriously consider submitting better offers. The Non-Agricultural Market Access (NAMA) issue has now become a bargaining factor.

The agricultural negotiations were initiated in early 2000 under Article 20 of the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) to cut import tariffs and reduce domestic and export subsidies. However, it was not reasonable to put counter pressure on the developing world to reduce their industrial tariff, which is already 26% on average. The developed countries clearly recognise the developing world's weak bargaining position regarding this agriculture issue, so their strategy works well so far.

Unfortunately for the developing nations, the developed world has been disregarding the Doha Agreement on NAMA, which states: "The NAMA negotiation shall take fully into account the special needs and interests of developing and least-developed country participants including through less than full reciprocity in reduction commitments." The EU and Japan proposed to NAMA that developed countries could impose a tariff as high as 10% and developing countries a tariff of 15%, including flexibilities.

On the other hand, developing countries proposed for a tariff of 5% for developed countries and a tariff of 15% for developing nations, with a 10% flexibility to protect some sensitive sectors from industrial tariff cuts. The EU disagreed with this offer, arguing that it would be

meaningless.

For example, Brazil has a total of 9,000 tariff lines. If it excludes 10% of these lines from the proposed tariff reduction, 900 lines would be removed. The entire sector of motor vehicles and their parts, IT products, steel products, and footwear could be included this category.

The EU insisted that there must be a comparable interest in both agricultural and industrial products, as mentioned in the HK Declaration: "We instruct our negotiators to ensure that there is a comparably high level of ambition in market access for Agriculture and NAMA. This ambition is to be achieved in a balanced and proportionate manner consistent with the principle of special and differential treatment."

Taking advantage of the principle of comparability, developing countries want flexibility on 10% of tariff lines in industrial products, while the EU wants flexibility on 8% of tariff lines in agricultural products.

Aside from these three major hurdles, there are some other issues where divergence exists. In RTA Transparency Mechanism, the WTO is trying to improve the relationship between the RTAs and the WTO.

However, divergence exists in two areas: one regarding the bodies that apply the transparency mechanism, and the other regarding the scope of the transparency mechanism.

In the area of Special and Differential Treatment, no effort has been taken so far to implement the decision taken in HK for providing duty-free and quota-free market access to 97% of products originating from LDCs. In the Trade Facilitation area, it is estimated that halving the cost of bureaucratic trade procedures could result in saving around 300 billion dollars a year.

Unfortunately, the developed members are not yet up to speed in their technical assistance program for capacity-building and customs procedure improvement of the developing and least developed countries.

WTO authorities have been trying to determine why they failed in maintaining the timelines. They say the Round is more difficult than expected, because it is so large and complex.

Maybe they are right, but it is also true that WTO members have not yet achieved their goals, which include enhancing effective trade-related technical assistance and providing aid for trade to LDCs on a priority basis to maximize the benefits of integrating their economies into the multilateral trading system. The trading world is expecting an early resolution of this present impasse, otherwise all hopes of developed, developing, and least developed countries encompassing the WTO will be jeopardised.

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Terrorism and its glorification

As for the UK, \$500 million has been channelled into such ruthless apparatus in Uzbekistan -- which is more than the total British aid to sub-Saharan Africa -- leading to a swelling in the numbers of West-haters. Therefore, the taxpayers in the US and UK are subsidising Al Qaeda. While the West is dismantling Saddam Hussain's torture networks in Iraq and creating their own in Cuba, it is also subsidising the ones of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan.

SAAD S KHAN

Nowadays, is terrorism glorified? Just recently, prominent terrorist Abu Musaab Zarqawi was killed in Iraq, and the Punjab Assembly held Fatiha responsible for his death. Is this not tantamount to glorifying terrorism? Perhaps. Punjab is no longer a part of the British Empire, though, and the MPAs have no reason to fear the bill banning the glorification of terrorism, which came into force in the United Kingdom this spring.

Lately, Israeli "self defence" forces murdered ten Palestinian civilians who were enjoying a picnic on the Gaza beach. The Palestinian government decried it as terrorism, while the Israelis denied responsibility. Then a few weeks ago, a Palestinian suicide bomber succeeded in penetrating into Israel and blew up a dozen restaurant diners after a lull of such attacks. The Israeli government was quick to decry it a "terrorist" attack, while the Palestinian government called it a "self-defence" attack and refused to condemn it.

The question is: which of these attacks were terrorism, and which ones were an act in self-defence? (Or is it that both sides were committing terrorism?) Calling terrorism self defence would constitute - if not glorification of terrorism, then at least as "abetting and condoning terrorism" -- all of which are now considered "criminal offences" in the United Kingdom under Tony Blair's new anti-terror codes.

Israelis are so afraid of terrorism that their "self defence Foreign Ministry" recently barred this writer, as a member of the Cambridge University delegation, from visiting Jerusalem and Palestine, because of fear of exposure of their self defence.

True, neither the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert nor his Palestinian counterpart Ismael Hanieh are British nationals, but heads of state having immunity from crimes against humanity is now a story of the yore. In the not too distant past, Chile's ex-despot and a known criminal, General Pinochet, was arrested in the UK, although he was released

on health grounds. However, many others were not so lucky, including Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia, and lately, Charles Taylor of Sierra Leone. These are among the criminals who could not hide behind the "head-of-state" impunity to evade the due process of law.

The new law in Britain, however, is a seminal landmark in humanity's quest for peace and justice. The acrimonious debate during the months between the introduction of this bill in the House of Commons to its reluctant approval at the House of Lords sometimes jeopardised its fate, but the bill shows great potential now that it has become law.

If the notion of glorifying and abetting terrorism is accepted as terrorism itself, then many liars will face the consequences. Tony Blair's assertions of not lying to his country and to the world about Iraq are now taken as a joke even here in the UK. His blind following of the nited States and his sometimes hypothetical policy of fighting against some terrorists and inancing others has led some US websites to coin the phrase: "Blair as Bush's poodle is an insult to poodles."

Shortly after this new terrorism law was passed, strong evidence arose against Blair's personal role in financing terrorism, but not in relation to Palestine, Iraq, or Guantanamo Bay. It was concerning Uzbekistan, where Blair financed terrorism. This evidence is actually the testimony of former British Ambassador and career civil servant, Craig Murray, who was sacked from the service by Blair for speaking out against the British abetment of serious abuses in Uzbekistan before a committee of the European Parliament in Brussels.

Craig Murray was a direct witness to many mock trials in Uzbekistan. He saw first-hand the evidence of torture -- including acid baths, electric shocks, and the boiling of people to death. His conscience failed to represent a government which was colluding in these atrocities. He ven wrote several memos to his government to inform them of Uzbekistan's

Islam Karimov's regime human rights violations, rampant torture, and unexplained disappearances at an industrial scale, and he also suggested a strong diplomatic pressure to stop such abuse. He was pressurised, sacked, and harassed, and he ultimately had a nervous breakdown.

According to Mr. Murray, he was called into the Foreign Office where he was offered a "comfortable posting" as Ambassador to Copenhagen if he withdrew his notes, and if he did not cooperate, he would be threatened with a charge sheet for "having issued British visas in return for sexual favours in his office." Can a civilised government stoop so low as to vandalise the life and career of one of its own citizens, when it dares to make a recommendation to defend human rights? It was after seeing the faces of some Western statesmen of his time that Mahatma Gandhi was compelled, when asked what he thought of Western civilization and values, to remark that "it would be a good idea."

What happened last year in the tiny town of Andijan in Uzbekistan, when 745 unarmed civilians, mostly women and children, were massacred for protesting against mock trials of 21 local youths? Karimov's regime traded with their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan to escape these crimes against humanity. The civilised world lived through the silence of this act throughout the next year.

Islam Karimov is known as the most ruthless dictator in the world, a world where the slightest dissent is responded to with endemic torture. Al Qaeda and its supporters are no match for Karimov's security forces, and in fact, the latter are turning ordinary secular dissenters of Karimov into Al Qaeda sympathizers.

Yet, the United States gave \$120 million in aid to Uzbek military forces and another \$82 worth of equipment and training to civilian security forces. This means that the United States and its allies are not only condoning terrorism and crimes against humanity, but they are actively supporting and financing it. As for the UK, \$500 million has been channelled into such

ruthless apparatus in Uzbekistan -- which is more than the total British aid to sub-Saharan Africa -- leading to a swelling in the numbers of West-haters. Therefore, the taxpayers in the US and UK are subsidising Al Qaeda. While the West is dismantling Saddam Hussain's torture networks in Iraq and creating their own in Cuba, it is also subsidising the ones of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan.

As for glorifying terrorism and terrorists, one may argue that the statements of Bush and Blair concerning known tyrants and criminals support such an idea; they called Islam Karimov a "champion of freedom," Tunisia's Benali an "island of stability," and Egypt's Mubarak "our friend." At least Mr Blair has, by criminalising this glorification, unwittingly put his own post-retirement liberty at risk.

True, this glorifying phrase can be applied selectively in Blair's own country. For example, when the Imam of Finsbury Park Mosque of London, Abu Hamza, receives seven years imprisonment for inciting hatred in his speeches, and when Nick Griffin, the head of the nationalist and white supremacist BNP party, is set free for lack of evidence on more or less the same charges of inciting racial hatred. But given that courts in Spain and Belgium have acquired universal jurisdiction to try terrorism related offences, which includes -- one would presume -- glorifying it, a time may come when democratic leaders in the world find themselves behind bars for having knowingly supported tyrants. As the weekly Economist wrote recently, it was "not just an ethical point, coddling tyrants has strategic costs too." One must add that in the years to come, strategic costs may come to individuals as well as to the United States.

The Chancellor of Exchequer and potentially the next Prime Minister of Britain, Gordon Brown, believes that "Britishness is not about common blood or culture, about dreaming spires and changing of guards, but is based on a sober set of shared values." If the new bill defends these values and takes to task any citizen, be he a Prime Minister (like Blair) or a common man, rather than bullying certain sections of ethnic minorities alone, then this terrorism bill will go a long way towards making the world a safer place to live.

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Carrying the fire

In Greek mythology, Apollo carried the sun in a chariot across the sky. Collins, who took Apollo 11 to the moon, found a striking similarity between the myth and the flights of the modern space vehicles powered by raw, raging, and scorching fire. "How would you carry fire?" Collins contemplates in his memorable memoirs, "Very carefully, that's how, with lots of planning and at considerable risk."

GOLAM KIBRIA

[It is 9.55 pm local time now. The countdown clock at NASA's website is showing 2 hours 40 minutes to lift-off. Another journey of the space shuttle Discovery will begin soon, marking the 18th US flight to the International Space Station. Commanded by Steven Lindsey, a crew of 5 American astronauts and 1 European astronaut will participate in the mission. It somehow seems appropriate recapping the events that marks the history of space missions.]

MICHAEL Collins called it "Carrying the Fire." In Greek mythology, Apollo carried the sun in a chariot across the sky. Collins, who took Apollo 11 to the moon, found a striking similarity between the myth and the flights of the modern space vehicles powered by raw, raging, and scorching fire. "How would you carry fire?" Collins contemplates in his memorable memoirs, "Very carefully, that's how, with lots of planning and at considerable risk."

After 35 years, on August 9, 2005, another Collins, Commander Eileen, who was flying the space shuttle Discovery round the Earth at an altitude of 329 km, radioed to Mission Control: "We are ready for whatever we need to do." With that, she actually accepted an alternate option to land in the Edwards Airforce Base in California, which NASA was compelled to select as the weather was not improving in Kennedy Space Centre, Cape Canaveral, Florida -- the primary site for Discovery's landing.

As the shuttle crew decided to land at Edwards, a series of complex maneuvers by Discovery started. Shuttle pilot, James Kelly,

fired the two Orbital Manoeuvring System engines, positioned at the base of the vertical tail abaft the fuselage, with extreme care. The risk loomed large on manifold accounts. Failure was not an option in any of the operations that would follow.

Earlier, during lift off, foam fillers from the fuel tank had dropped, though NASA maintained that the half kg. chunk of the loose foam did miss the orbiter and no harm was done to its heat shield. But why was the ceramic filler material protruding? Were the bonds failing in any other place? If a single piece of thermal tile, 6 by 6 inches in size, gets displaced during re-entry, it would simply unleash the fire-breathing dragon loose on Discovery, and there were 20,000 pieces to worry about. A similar kind of impact damaged Columbia's heat shield and caused it to burn up during re-entry on February 1, 2002.

The two ceramic impregnated strips of cloth discovered during inspection in space, were sticking out an inch or so, from between the thermal tiles under the heat shield. They were eventually ripped off clean and the possibility of their generating excess heat was thus minimised. It took an unprecedented space-walk by astronaut Steve Robinson, the first of its kind in the history of shuttles program, assisted by Soichi Noguchi, who operated the robotic arm of the International Space Station (ISS). Steve succeeded in pulling out the strips of cloth, though it took seven. That was because the job warranted extreme care. If the robotic arm, or any of Steve's tools, came in contact with the fragile tiles on the shield, disaster would be inevitable.

Another damaged section on the

thermal blanket near the cockpit window was left unattended, obviating the need for the fourth space-walk, as NASA thought it was not posing any risk to the safe landing of Discovery. The pieces of cloth sticking out were part of the filler materials -- taking up gaps between the thermal tiles -- to provide cushioning during the most arduous transit through the Earth's atmosphere which makes its temperature rise sharply.

The landing was being postponed due to inclement weather in Florida. It almost reached a must-land situation as the provisions, i.e. food and water, were running short. They had barely one days provision left on Tuesday and the capacity of the lithium hydroxide/carbon scrubbers to remove carbon dioxide from the living space of Discovery was diminishing rapidly. A normal trip of the space shuttle spanned 5 days. But this time it was in space for 14 days, out of which it remained docked with ISS for 9 days.

As discovery fired its Orbital Manoeuvring System engines, the vehicle slowed down in its inverted position, moving tail first into orbit. Then it used its Reaction Control System nozzles to swing back to the normal position, taking the nose through an arc of 180 degrees and running it nose first, up-side-up. As it slowed down, the journey to the Earth began. The art of bringing back an orbiter is incredibly simple. In space it moves at a velocity constantly trying to break away from the pull of the Earth but always held back by an invisible tether called gravity. The shuttle's centrifugal momentum is checked and balanced constantly by the centripetal pull of the Earth. And they remain at an equilibrium, without having to expend extra energy by way of

running a propulsion engine. But if the orbiter slows down, Earth's gravity prevails and forces it to fall, literally.

The reason for using the OMS engines is to slow down the orbiter so that it could fall gradually towards the Earth. It started falling from the sky, from an altitude of 329 kms at 7:06 am ET 4:06 am Pacific time. It fell sharply over the Indian Ocean for forty minutes and entered Earth's atmosphere over the Pacific. As the infra-red camera was tracking its re-entry in the pre-dawn darkness, Discovery glowed to incandescence with a temperature of 1630 degrees in her heat shields, traveling through the ocean of air molecules at 27,360 km/hour, at an inclination of 40 degrees. Once inside the atmosphere, the space-craft became an aircraft, gliding through its fly-path that took it to the Mojave desert north of Los Angeles in California. 3 minutes before landing, two sonic booms, hallmark of a shuttle's landing, heralded its advent on the horizon, giving rise to lots of whoops and cheers before it finally landed on runway 22 of the Edwards Airforce Base, at 8:11 am ET 5:11 am Pacific Time. By then it had completed 219 orbits around the world and traveled 9.3 million kilometers.

As the shuttle turned absolutely white in the thermal images that Mission Control were watching on their monitors, a gentleman named Dr. John Clark was lost in his own thoughts in the Kennedy Space Centre. He is the NASA neurologist and husband of astronaut Laurel Clark. Laurel died on the first of February 2002, when Columbia burnt out while entering Earth's atmosphere.

"I thought, 'This is when the tire light went on,'" Clark said from Kennedy Space Center, referring to an initial sensor reading that the Columbia was breaking up. "I was paralleling the two missions."

It was not Clark alone who was paralleling the two missions. Thousands of miles away, in India, the mother of Kalpana Chawla, the deceased Indian astronaut of Columbia, was earnestly praying for

Discovery's safe return. When she heard that Discovery had made a safe landing, she said: "It is like my daughter coming back alive."

From the days of Apollo 1, the saga of space flight has been strewn with tragedies. On January 27, 1967, a fire in the cockpit of Apollo 1 killed all three astronauts who were carrying out the final tests and it happened on the launch pad. Though Apollo 13 finally managed to come back home safely, it had the closest brush with destruction due to loss of oxygen while in space. Very brilliantly re-created by two great actors, Tom Hanks and Ed Harris, one on the Earth and the other in space, Apollo 13 was a movie revealing the human story behind every space venture.

On January 28, 1986, Challenger blew up 73 seconds into its fateful flight. The first teacher en route to space, Sharon Christa McAuliffe, working under TISP -- Teacher In Space Program -- died along with 5 other men and 1 woman.

Investigation reports revealed that the disaster was due to the failure of an O-ring seal in the solid-fuel rocket on Challenger's right side, that allowed hot gases to pass and damage the attachment of one of the booster rockets. It broke loose, hit and pierced the liquid oxygen tank, combining raw liquid oxygen and hydrogen into a raging fire that finally engulfed Challenger, burning its crew alive.

Columbia burnt off into ashes over the Pacific ocean on February 1, 2002, killing 5 men and two women. This was caused by the same type of falling debris during lift off as Discovery's. Ironically, Discovery was sent up after a protracted period during which modifications and improvements were made after the Columbia disaster. It also was meant to carry out repairs with techniques that had been devised after the Columbia disaster to handle damages that may occur due to similar causes. The astronauts never realised that they would be in the same situation as Columbia itself, and would have to count on luck while passing through the atmospheric resistance of mother Earth during re-

entry.

The Russian history of space flight is also full of trials and errors with resulting tragedies attached. During the cold war era, in a bid to beat the Americans, the Russians stretched themselves to the limit where the parameter called safety was totally ignored. The astronauts used to be treated as secret service agents, their whereabouts and movements clandestine and their disappearances un-disclosed. The first man ever to go into orbit was Yuri Gagarin and his death is apparently attributed to an aircraft crash. But there is suspicion that he died in a rocket mishap. Many of the accidents and deaths went unreported or were attributed to false causes.

With the space shuttle program that originated during President Nixon's time in early 70s, and succeeded in launching the first space shuttle, Columbia, in 1981, the Russians became increasingly uncomfortable. Primarily, the shuttle program was poised to carry payloads to space for research activities but its military capability was potentially diverse and that influenced the Russians in an adverse way. They raced for a match, developing BORAN, a similar space vehicle that could glide back to Earth and be reused, retaining the same look as the American shuttles. The first flight of Boran almost ended in a disaster but escaped with sheer luck. Part of the launch pad was gutted by the hot exhaust gas that strayed from the exhaust bunker as the spaceship tilted badly during lift off. However, the space craft performed its journey and return from space safely.

In these days of post cold-war era, where transparency, safety and care for environment take precedence over everything else, including mastery of technology and power, it is obvious that NASA will have to weigh many of its old paradigms in the light of the imperatives of a new world and revamp and modernise its space program.

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Space shuttle Discovery takes off from Kennedy Space Center.