

WTO on brink of historic trade reform

REUTERS, NUSA DUA, Indonesia

Ministers appeared close to sealing the world's biggest trade reform for two decades early on Saturday after India, the most vocal holdout, endorsed a draft text presented by the head of the World Trade Organization.

The deal, thrashed out at talks on the Indonesian island of Bali, would lower trade barriers and speed up the passage of goods through customs. Analysts estimate that over time it could boost the world economy by hundreds of billions of dollars and create more than 20 million jobs, mostly in developing countries.

Failure would have represented a body blow to the 159-nation WTO, formed in 1995 and still without a major trade deal to its credit after many years of negotiating fiascos.

"It is a victory for the WTO and for the global community to have arrived at a mature decision," Indian Trade Minister Anand Sharma told reporters. "We are more than happy. It is a great day. It is a historic day."

The deal requires unanimous support, and a potential veto could still come from Cuba, whose representative banged the table and shouted at WTO chief Roberto Azevedo after the meeting where his draft agreement was distributed to all the members, a participant at the meeting said.

Cuba has been consistently demanding the United States lift its economic embargo of the Caribbean island as part of the Bali agreement, but trade diplomats say it has made the same demand for decades and they do not expect it to block a deal.

Heads of delegation were to resume informal talks in the early hours of Saturday, but a diplomat said the meeting had been delayed by an hour because of last-minute concerns about the wording of a compromise on food subsidies.

That is the vital issue for India, which this year

announced a massive programme for stockpiling food to feed to the poor, in breach of the WTO rules on subsidies.

Another diplomat said the delay was caused by Cuba consulting with Azevedo.

RED TAPE

Azevedo, a Brazilian diplomat, took the helm of the WTO in September and immediately launched a punishing regime of round-the-clock talks and "whatever works" diplomacy. Even so, the outcome had appeared in grave doubt as recently as Thursday.

If agreed, the reform would slash red tape at customs around the world, give improved terms of trade to the poorest countries, and allow developing countries to skirt the normal rules on farm subsidies if they are trying to feed the poor.

It would also revive confidence in the WTO's ability to negotiate global trade deals, after it consistently failed to clinch agreement in the Doha round of talks that started in 2001 and proved hugely over-ambitious.

As the Doha round stuttered to a halt, momentum shifted away from global trade pacts in favour of regional deals such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership that the United States is negotiating with 11 other countries, and a similar agreement it is pursuing bilaterally with the European Union.

Failure in Bali would have led to a more divided world, with regional blocs reversing the WTO's globalising goals, some experts say.

The "Bali package" now on the table secures a handful of elements of the Doha round that were thought to be doable and declares a "strong resolve" to pursue agreement on the rest.

India's concerns that the Bali deal would give only a temporary shield to its food stockpile plan were resolved with wording that promised a search for a more permanent solution.

"The food security fix is something out of 1984, George Orwell would be proud," said Simon Evenett, professor of international trade at

Man shot dead

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Sumon during the shooting.

The brother chased the shooters and with the help of locals caught Mohammad Sohag and handed him over to police. The other shooter and their getaway motorbike rider managed to flee the scene.

On the motive, Sohag told police that they had demanded Tk 3 lakh from Sumon's family, but they were paid Tk 2 lakh, said Kamal Hossain, assistant commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

A great light

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three days, in a glass-topped coffin allowing well-wishers to pay their respects. A funeral will be held on 15 December, attended by world leaders.

Mandela's final resting place will be the modest village of Qunu in the Eastern Cape, a place where Mandela wrote in his memoir, Long Walk to Freedom, that he had spent "some of the happiest years of my boyhood".

Mandela spent 27 years in an apartheid prison before becoming president and unifying his country with a message of reconciliation after the end of white minority rule. He shared the Nobel Peace Prize with South Africa's last white president FW de Klerk in 1993.

The strength and breadth of Mandela's global appeal was reflected by the range of tributes from world leaders, piling up with every minute that passed after his death at home in Johannesburg at 8.50pm on Thursday night.

Presidents and prime ministers, from Washington to Beijing, Havana to Delhi, from Jerusalem to the West Bank, all claimed to draw inspiration from the South African legend. Mandela set a benchmark for statesmanship against which all others have been measured.

It is not just the powerful who mourn his death. Many people, interviewed around the world, expressed their sense of loss, and in many places gathered to pay their respects.

Outside his house in the upmarket Houghton suburb and at his former residence in the once blacks-only township of Soweto, scores of well-wishers danced and sang old songs of struggle to celebrate the man they lovingly call Madiba.

Some in Johannesburg rushed from their homes in their pyjamas after hearing of his passing, while many brought along children too young to have known the brutal and racist South Africa that Mandela fought to overcome.

"I did not come here to mourn. We are celebrating the life of a great man. A great unifier," said local resident Bobby Damon.

An impromptu shrine sprang up in London's Trafalgar Square as people left flowers outside the South African embassy, scenes of countless anti-apartheid protests during his long imprisonment.

In Kiev, where Ukrainians have gathered for anti-government demonstrations around the clock for the past week, protesters took a moment to recall Mandela's legacy.

In New York City's Harlem neighbourhood, Franco Gaskin, 85, an artist, stood before a mural featuring Mandela that he had painted on a shop front almost 20 years ago. He remembered Mandela visiting there in 1990. "It was dynamic, everyone was so electrified to see him in Harlem," Gaskin said. "I idolised him. He leaves a legacy that all of us should follow."

Mandela, who made reconciliation and dignity the twin pillars of his political philosophy, sought to follow in the footsteps of earlier heroes of peaceful resistance such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, but not even they were lionised around the globe by so many leaders from such a wide ideological spectrum.

Flags flew at half-mast in numerous countries, including the United States, France and Britain and at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

In Paris, the Eiffel Tower lit up in green, red, yellow and blue to symbolise the South African flag while India declared five days of mourning for a man the premier labelled "a true Gandhian".

US leader Barack Obama, his country's own first black president led a global roll call of commemorations.

"I am one of the countless millions who drew inspiration from Nelson Mandela's life," said a visibly moved Obama. "And like so many around the globe, I cannot fully imagine my own life without the example that Nelson Mandela set, and so long as I live I will do what I can to learn from him."

In London, David Cameron said Mandela was a towering figure: "A great light has gone out in the world. Nelson Mandela was a towering figure in our time; a legend in life and now in death, a true global hero."

In the Middle East, the Israeli prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, and the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, found rare common cause in paying homage.

"He was never haughty," Netanyahu said. "He worked to heal rifts within South African society and succeeded in preventing outbreaks of racial hatred."

Abbas said Mandela was a "symbol of freedom from colonialism and occupation" and his death was a great loss for Palestine, whose cause he championed.

"The Palestinian people will never forget his historic statement that the South African revolution will not have achieved its goals as long as the Palestinians are not free," Abbas said.

Manmohan Singh, the Indian prime minister, referenced his country's own independence leader, Mahatma Gandhi. "A giant among men has passed away. This is as much India's loss as South Africa's. He was a true Gandhian. His life and work will remain a source of eternal inspiration for generations to come. I join all those who are praying for his soul."

Gandhi spent formative years as a political activist in South Africa and Mandela knew Gandhi's son Manilal, historians pointed out.

The Dalai Lama said he would miss his "dear friend", whom he hailed as "a man of courage, principle and unquestionable integrity".

Mandela is survived by three daughters, 18 grandchildren, nine great-grandchildren and three step-grandchildren.

NOMINATION SCRUTINY

EC validates 847 runners

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

After scrutiny, the Election Commission has validated the candidature of 847 lawmaker aspirants of the 10th parliamentary polls.

It cancelled the nominations of 260 candidates, including those of all from Laxmipur-3 constituency.

In 33 constituencies, Awami League candidates would not face any competition. They would be declared unopposed winners if they do not withdraw from the race by December 13.

They have become the only candidates in their constituencies after returning officers

cancelled the nominations of their rivals in 21 constituencies yesterday and 12 on Thursday.

The potential unopposed winners include Awami League General Secretary Syed Ashraf Islam in Kishoreganj-1, former home minister MK Alamgir in Chandpur-1, party leader Abdur Rahman in Faridpur-1, former foreign minister Dipu Moni in Chandpur-3, Awami League deputy office secretary Mrinal Kanti Das in Munshiganj-3, and Rezwan Ahmed Taufiq, son of President Abdul Hamid in Kishoreganj-4.

Wise words from Mandela

FROM PAGE 1

going for the traditional toast President Mandela said, "Before concluding I would like to say a few words about what we did in South Africa to achieve national reconciliation."

What he said captivated the audience who listened with pin drop silence as the legendary leader of the anti-apartheid movement and now, by far the most loved and honoured leader in the world, moved away from his printed speech and added the following words.

"Before we started negotiations with the enemy we made the following three decisions

a)Neither we nor our enemies will emerge victorious, only the people of South Africa should emerge victorious. (emphasis mine). We decided that from our work, and from our struggle people must win and not one political party.

b)That there are good people in all communities -- black, white, Afrikaans, coloured, Indians, etc. Not only that, we went one step further and said that there are good people in all political parties and not only in the ANC.

c)That smaller parties joining our government will be heard and their views will be given due importance. There was to be a government of 27 in which there will be 18 from ANC, six from the second largest party (de Klerk's) and three from the smallest party (Inkatha). It was our responsibility to convince the smaller parties that their views will get due importance. This way we were able to isolate the extremists and the fascists.

The ANC is a proud liberation movement of the 20th century. Though it was this single party that led the freedom struggle, yet we decided not to make South Africa a one-party state. We did not abuse power, trust and confidence that were bestowed on us, not only by our people, but also by the whole international community.

Finally I want to say that I have been elected the president of South Africa. Anything that happens in South Africa now reflects on me, regardless of our history. I am responsible for everything that happens in my country."

This writer feels that sharing the above words was perhaps the best gift that President Mandela could have given to the people of Bangladesh on the occasion of the conclusion of our Silver Jubilee celebration. Will we be wise enough to heed them?

Editor's note: As we read and re-read this piece written 16 years ago, we gasp in wonder at the wisdom, the foresight and the vision of this man. He seems to have sensed the underlying antagonism and destructive competitiveness of our politics and was saying how important it is to reconcile and to have a "win-win" rather than a "winner-take-all" attitude in politics. He was trying to warn us against the path of self-aggrandisement and pleading for modesty.

What he said more than a decade and half ago seems to be so much more urgent, so much more applicable and so much needed in our politics today. We urge our politicians to repeatedly read the above "wise words" and consider whether we can re-think our politics. May be Mandela's "wisdom" can rescue us at this time of our crisis.

No appointment

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He landed at 7:55pm yesterday, leading a five-member high-profile political mission.

Ahead of his visit, the government has outright turned down the UN envoy's request to meet President Abdul Hamid and Chief of Army Staff General Iqbal Karim Bhuiyan.

However, Taranco is scheduled to meet twice Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia when he would convey each other's messages mainly to encourage dialogues for a peaceful solution.

In his first phase of meetings, the UN official is set to meet the PM at her official residence Gono Bhavan at 4:00pm and the BNP chairperson at 7:00pm today at her Gulshan home.

Taranco had earlier visited Dhaka in December last year and May this year to work out a solution to the same political crisis "at the request" of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

Other members of the delegation are two senior officials from the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), a director from the Electoral Assistance Division (EAD) and a senior mediation expert of the UN.

In addition to meeting with the PM and the BNP chief, the UN envoy would also hold talks with Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Rakibuddin

Ahmad, Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque, leaders of the major political parties and representatives of the civil society and the media.

Asked about the reasons of the government denial to give appointments with the president and the army chief, a senior official at the foreign ministry yesterday told The Daily Star that the meeting with the president could not be fixed as he [president] was in Singapore for medical checkup.

The official added the UN office wanted an appointment for Oscar with the army chief to discuss security issues during the polls.

The government thought there was no necessity for the UN official to meet the army chief as the entire administration and security goes under the Election Commission during polls, said the official, adding, so the government suggested that the UN official meets the CEC.

According to today's programme schedule, the UN official would meet the foreign secretary at 10:00am and the foreign minister at 10:30am at the foreign ministry.

At 11:30am, Taranco would hold a meeting with three Awami League leaders led by General Secretary Syed Ashraf Islam at Hotel Sonargaon. His meeting with BNP's acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir has become uncertain since the leader is in hiding.

He would meet the CEC tomorrow at

Send resignation letters to PM

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On Thursday, Hawlader, Commerce Minister GM Quader, State Minister for Youth and Sports Mujibul Haque Chunnun, and State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Salma Islam handed over their letters of resignation to Ershad for submission to the President.

However, three other JP leaders -- Health Minister Raushan Ershad, Water Resources Minister Anisul Islam Mahmud and PM's Adviser Ziauddin Bablu -- did not do so as of last night.

They too have been asked to submit their letters of resignation to the premier today.

JP insiders said Raushan, Anis and Bablu had been showing unwillingness to quit the polls-time cabinet.

Last night, some ruling Awami League leaders had a meeting with Raushan.

JP sources said Raushan had discussed the meeting agenda with Ershad.

According to JP and AL sources, the three JP leaders might sever relations with their party and stay in the cabinet under Raushan's leadership, if Ershad did not reach an understanding with the AL.

But yesterday, the JP chairman reiterated his firm stance of not contesting the January 5 parliamentary elections until all the political parties take part in it.

The AL is also holding talks with the party to include Ershad in the ballot race.

AL sources said several ruling party leaders, including Amir Hossain Amu, Tofail Ahmed, Obaidul Quader and Mahbubul Alam Hanif, had been tasked with talking to the JP high command and bringing Ershad in the polls.

The sources said AL in principle had decided to meet several demands of Ershad, including that of not racing in 70 seats, if he contested the polls.

Economy at multiple risks

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report yesterday (Thursday night, Washington time) after approving Bangladesh the fourth instalment of Extended Credit Facility loans.

It says with the uncertainty and disruption during the pre-election period, the country's GDP growth in the current fiscal year is projected to decline to 5.5 percent against the government target of 7.2 percent.

In the last four FYs, Bangladesh achieved an average of 6.2 percent GDP growth.

The risks also stem from the increase in minimum wages and string of accidents in the RMG sector, and withdrawal of Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) facility by the US, according to the report.

As a result, the RMG industry will face higher operating costs and face moderate displacement of external demands as some buyers shift in response to the industrial accidents, it says.

The direct impact of GSP facility withdrawal

would be limited, as it excluded RMG and covered only 0.6 percent of Bangladesh's export, observed IMF, adding that the decision on labour rights concerns, however, carried an important message.

The risks from the external environment could originate from a growth downturn in Europe or from the withdrawal of preferential market access under the European Union's GSP, which arises out of a perceived lack of progress in labour standard and workers' safety condition.

The IMF also said due to the ongoing political uncertainty capital flight had increased which contributed to the fall in remittance inflow in the recent times.

"The decline in official remittance data may also be masking some capital flight ahead of the elections, as funds are diverted from formal banking channel to informal channels", it said, adding, "This phenomenon is typical in election years, and is expected to normalise once political conditions settle."

major portion of books but could not send those.

"The entire process has come to a standstill. Many printers are not taking the risk of sending books amid blockade fearing arsons. Truckers too don't want to move amid such a situation," said the proprietor of a printing house that got a work order for 2.5 crore copies of textbooks.

Besides, the NCTB had said they would not take any responsibility if any such incidents occurred, said the proprietor asking not to be identified.

"It is the key month for textbook distribution. But we are unsure about meeting the deadline if the political situation remains unchanged," he added.

The printer said their cost of transportation had doubled as the truck owners were charging extra due to the volatile political situation.

"It used to take Tk 17,000 to Tk 18,000 to reach books to Chittagong from Dhaka, but now it went up to Tk 35,000," he said.

Contacted, NCTB Chairman Prof Shafiqur Rahman told The Daily Star, "You can understand the current situation. We are using whatever scopes we have to distribute the books in time."

"I'm still hopeful," he said, claiming that majority of the books had already been sent to destinations.