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One consults; one does not negotiate

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Negotiations have started. At least, it is the formula used. For one did not really negotiate yet.

The conference is composed officially of three types of meetings:

- the plenary sitting where each minister expresses the point of view of his country; a long litany speech where it is rare that one learns something new;
- the meetings organised by the facilitators each one in charge of a file (see note V of 12 December): participation is by countries which wish to intervene on the file or by the representatives of groups of countries;
- the meeting of the heads of delegation: this involves the meeting of the delegates from each country.

To these formal meetings, must be added the informal meetings to the joint initiative of the Director-General and the richest countries (EU, USA, Japan) to which are invited about twenty countries.

There are finally meetings where, of their own initiative, ministers meet either by region, or by file.

From Tuesday evening, after the opening sitting, an informal meeting assembled approximately 25 countries. The information that I could collect leads me to bring back the following. The President of the conference, Mr Tsang, the Hong Kong trade Minister, stressed the need for the participants not to repeat their positions - which had the consequence that not only did each one point out his own position, but then designated who was responsible for blocking the various files. Usually, this kind of trade precedes the final failure. This time, it served as an introduction to the conference...

The USA, hardened their position by recalling that there would be agreement on nothing if there were not agreement on all. The EU announced that it stuck to its proposals in the agricultural file. The representative of the African group stated that the African countries concerned with the cotton file would take part in no consensus if a solution were not brought to this problem. Traditional hardening before any negotiation? Perhaps.

While, at this informal meeting, one might have the impression of low cohesion among the countries of the South, on the contrary, the meeting which follows and which involved G20, G33, G90, the ACP countries, the LDCs, in short all the south - 600 people, it was said, were present - has left the feeling of a renewed will to overcome a differences which could ruin the chances of all the development countries if, at the instigation of the EU and USA, they were prised apart.

The facilitators in charge, respectively, of agriculture, of the NAMA (access to the market of the non agricultural products) and of development brought together each one a number of ministers. They asked them to answer the question: how to improve the ministerial draft declaration? The answers having been given, one can say that the facilitators had to be satisfied with carrying out consultations and that no negotiation really started. There was a statement of differences. There were no meetings on the services, or on the other matters.

The impression that the persons responsible for the WTO seem to want to give, is that the service

file is abandoned. Admittedly, one can think that the decision taken in Geneva, on the insistence of the African countries, to put the reference to the Annex C in square brackets (see my note IV of 5 December) calls now for consensus to suppress the hooks and that consequently the probability is low to have any advance on this file. One keeps nevertheless to the spirit that this file is ready and that the annex c of the draft ministerial declaration, unlike the other annexes, is not a situation report on the state on negotiations, but a list of decisions. Within the framework of an end of conference haggling, it would be imprudent to exclude as a possibility, that one could very well suppress the hooks and all the Annex C would become consequently the decision of the conference - which, it must be recalled, has binding treaty value.

In passing, I would point out that the European Commissioner Peter Mandelson declared to the members of Parliament at this meeting in Hong Kong that the African countries asked for the Annex C. Although it was they who, in Geneva, fought so that this annex is called into question. Lie, lie, it will always remain something.

The traps of aid for trade

To make believe that “development is at the centre of the trade negotiations”, the rich countries launched the concept of aid for trade which should form part of the “development package of Hong Kong”. This generosity should urge the countries for which it is intended to accept the Western proposals. But what generosity does this involve?

I have already stated that the announced amounts are intended for helping the beneficiary countries to apply agreements of the WTO which they do not want. Regarding the reality of given aid, judge rather:

a) the EU promises 2 billion euros in 2010 from which half will come directly from the Member States. But at the G8 Summit on 6-8 July 2005, in Gleneagles (Scotland), Barroso, the President of the European Commission, had already announced this European offer within the framework of the cancellation of the debt of certain countries.

b) the USA announces their intention to increase their contribution to aid for trade from 1.3 billion US dollars in 2005 to 2.7 billion in 2010. Actually, this aid has already been decided and was announced at the last meeting of the G7's Ministers for Finance.

c) Japan gives 10 billion US dollars spread out over three years. It is exactly what it had announced at the Gleneagles Summit for the cancellation of the debt of certain countries.

One can see, it is the same money that the richest countries of the world promise several times at international meetings. Obviously, these amounts are not added up.

P.S.

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