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BELARUS

Statement by Mr Sergei Gulevich, Delegate of the Permanent
Mission of Belarus at Geneva on behalf of
H.E. Mr. Aleksander Mikhnevich
Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs

(Speaking as an Observer)

It is a great pleasure for me to express our gratitude to the Government of Mexico, the organizing committee and the WTO staff for the excellent management of this Conference. I think we all agree it would be a shame if in these conditions the necessary decisions are not taken. My most sincere congratulations also to the delegations of Cambodia and Nepal on the occasion of their joining the WTO.

Full-fledged integration in the world economy and the multilateral trading system is part of the sustainable development strategy of Belarus, and a priority of its foreign policy. We consider membership in the WTO as an important means to prove credibility of our foreign trade regime to investors and traders worldwide, by way of guaranteeing that we abide by internationally agreed rules and disciplines. Belarus has not changed its commitment to WTO accession ever since it filed the application with the GATT in 1993. I believe there is a lot to learn from these ten years. Indeed, we have been working hard. To highlight just a few economic indicators for Belarus between 1993 and 2002:

- GDP grew from 3 to 14 billion dollars;
- trade with WTO Members increased from 2 to 6.5 billion dollars;
- the trade-weighted average customs tariff went down from 20 to 8.5 per cent.

Given that my country has always been an open European economy with foreign trade totals well above GDP, this impressive performance demonstrates that Belarus, by definition, would not be able to exist otherwise than following international rules and practices. Of course, a lot remains to be done. But domestic reform would progress much faster if it were accompanied by early accession to the WTO system. So the question that comes up is why Belarus, like 24 other acceding countries, some of them negotiating WTO entry for a decade, is still outside the Organization, and what joint action is needed.

I believe everybody would agree that a situation where many accessions take longer than a WTO Round is not normal. The solution is one: they should be more rules-based and have a time-frame. This means that the Ministerial Text should provide something more than just a

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best-endeavour clause suggested in the draft, which in fact has not moved things much forward from previous declarations.

In this regard, Belarus delegation joins all those who propose to look at ways to keep the commitments sought from acceding countries at a level commensurate with their economic situation and with the obligations of the WTO Members. This could be done by reconfirming the case-by-case approach to accessions in the spirit of Article XII of the WTO Agreement, as opposed to setting-one-standard-for-all, which has been practised by some Members - much to the detriment of pragmatic opening of new markets.

Absence of flexibility, as a result, has in some cases left new Members with, firstly, a "commercially viable" package of commitments that does not actually add commercial attraction to the country; secondly, strengthened domestic WTO-sceptics; and, finally and worst of all, a political leadership likely to consider accession as a one-time foreign policy achievement rather than a long-term choice of economic strategy.

And we also need to be conscious of the risks involved in delaying negotiations, whether on new rules or accession. We should not forget that our duty is to deliver the benefits of the multilateral trading system to the people. It is now clear that the diversity among national positions on the Doha Agenda puts accessions at the risk of being deadlocked over issues debated between Members. We have seen this happen already before Doha. The conclusion to draw is that, like the Round, accession negotiations should have a time target. Accessions are part of the WTO agenda. They cannot go on forever.

In this respect, we call upon Members and acceding countries to commit ourselves to conclude accession negotiations by the next Ministerial Conference with those countries for which working parties were established under the GATT. It would consolidate the Doha Round by adding new important markets and, eventually, bringing the WTO membership as close to universal as it has never been.

Of course, these decisions require flexibility and leadership, at the political and technical levels. But that is what we are here for. And there is a base for that - the hard work we have invested over these last ten years. This, combined with goodwill and dedication, should help us move the international trading system forward on a broad, balanced and inclusive agenda.
