

SADC for more market access at WTO meet

Gaborone, Monday. SOUTHERN African countries will fight for greater market access of farm products, negotiate less inflow of textile commodities from Asia and obtain cheaper AIDS medicines when world trade ministers meet in Hong Kong late this year.

A common position of these countries, some among the poorest in the world, is likely to be forged after a preparatory meeting in September, an economy official of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) said here yesterday.

"WTO (World Trade Organisation) negotiations remain critical for the SADC region .. in four core areas: agriculture and non-agriculture market, services and development," said Fudzai Pamacheche, the regional bloc's acting director for trade, industry, finance and investment.

Pamacheche said the key focus on the agriculture issue was subsidies paid by industrialised countries to their farmers, which is thought a major cause to block African products from entering markets of the developed world.

Although some developed countries such as Britain have pledged to help Africa by writing off heavy debts and promising greater aids, African countries argued that the opening of market should be more essential for them.

"Our position is clear: subsidy should go," Pamacheche said before the heads of state and ministers of the 14 SADC members hold an annual meeting at Botswana's capital city of Gaborone from today.

He told a press briefing that SADC trade ministers are due to meet in September to prepare for the 6th WTO Ministerial Meeting set to take place in Hong Kong in December, this year.

Pamacheche expressed his concern over rapid influx of cheap textile products from Asian countries, saying the inflow should be better managed for the sake of less-competitive local manufacturers.

In some SADC countries like Lesotho and South Africa, local manufacturers bore the brunt of massive Asian imports in recent years, with many factories closed down and thousands of jobs lost, he said.

But the official emphasized that such an issue was more of better inflow management than a simple halt of inflow.

"We hope to resolve this question as what the European Union and China have done," he told *Xinhua*.

Pamacheche said SADC nations also want to ensure cheaper access to medicines, particularly those for AIDS treatment, because "the pandemic of HIV/AIDS is such a serious challenge (in SADC)."

Patented medicines often make HIV/AIDS treatment unaffordable in poor countries and there has been a long debate on how to achieve a balance between protections of patent rights of pharmaceutical enterprises and interests of the public under the WTO framework.

Southern African countries such as South Africa, which is home to half of the world's 42 million HIV/AIDS sufferers, Swaziland and Botswana have the highest HIV prevalence rate in the world, with some 20 per cent or over 30 per cent of the population being infected. The majority of them are young adults. —*Xinhua*