

**Interview with outgoing AU commissioner for
Trade, Industry and Economic Affairs: Vijay Makhan**

ADDIS ABABA, 18 September (IRIN) - Vijay Makhan is the outgoing African Union Commissioner for Trade, Industry and Economic Affairs. In an interview with IRIN, just days after returning from the failed trade talks in Cancun, Mexico where he led the AU mission he argues that rich nations have let down Africa once again despite their repeated promises and he calls for a radical overhaul of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Question: How do you feel regarding the events in Cancun?

A: To say the least, a bit disappointed at the way our partners approached the entire negotiations though we kept ourselves open as the African union to dialogue with the US, EU and Japan. In fact, they all solicited meetings with the AU, which goes to show the AU member states have a role to play in these negotiations. So we met with the US trade representative, Ambassador Robert Zoellick, and also with Pascal Lamy [from the EU] on a couple of occasions. We made known our positions and so everybody knew the African position. But what disturbed us was that it was not taken onboard, so to say. I have my own feeling that all the facilitation was a question of formality rather than to inject anything into the final text.

Q: So you are saying no one was taking Africa's concern seriously?

A: Well, yes a bit. When you look at the final conclusion or text coming out from the chairman, that text had left the position expressed by Africa on many of the issues, to the side. And that really went to prove that the Cancun process was more geared towards the developed countries' concerns yet again as opposed to the concerns of the developing countries. On top of that, bearing in mind that this round of negotiations is called a development round, it has to take on board the concerns and preoccupations, the expectations, the aspirations of the developing countries. This is what we went to Cancun for but there was no movement.

Q: So what did you do?

A: We met with all these people, we kept on telling them ..., but what we did as an African Union is form a strategic alliance with the group of least developed countries - since already in Africa you have so many of them – and also with the African and Caribbean, Pacific countries, and I think this demonstrated the common idea of purpose of these three groups. People started calling them the group of 90 because they formed 90 countries out of 148. I was asked a cynical question what percentage of trade these 90 countries represent. That is not the issue. The issue is not about the percentage of trade the issue is about all those poor people who live in these countries that make up the bulk of their populations.

And the international community keeps on spending resources and energy to bring together mega conferences, to organize mega conferences to address the issues of poverty, poverty eradication, education for all, all these social issues by a certain cut-off date, 2015, and yet this is an

opportunity that is being given to the international community to really take concrete action to meeting those objectives. Yet what we find is hardly any of those were onboard.

Q: What was the problem as you see it?

A: The problem was there was an insistence by the development partners to address new issues. Again the Singapore issues [Four issues that are: How countries treat foreign investors, Standards for anti-monopoly and cartel laws, Greater transparency in government purchasing, which might help foreign companies win public sector business, and Trade facilitation - making things like customs procedures simpler. Developing countries are concerned especially about investment rules, because many want to retain control over their own key industrial sectors] were brought up. All the time the Singapore issues [came up] while we were discussing issues about market access and agriculture, things were being cooked with respect to the Singapore issues and we are not ready - we have said that time and time again.

Q: So why do you think the talks broke up?

A: We are blaming the entire system. They [the developed nations] did not take on board what we wanted and these were very minimal things. There was no progress made on issues like market access, the issue of tariffs. We cannot play the same kind of games because the playing field is simply not level. And yet people expect us to commit more than the others are prepared to commit. On agriculture there was practically hardly any movement. We should not be forced into giving up our position. While we were discussing these there was an insistence, a kind of give and take situation where Singapore issues were going to be placed on the table. There was an insistence and we could not accept that. We simply do not have the capacity to do this.

Q: Given your view do you think the WTO as an organization is useful or important to Africa?

A: If the trend carries on this way I think there will have to be a rethink of the workings or non-workings of the WTO. We simply have to look at the way things are working. You can't blame the secretariat because this is a member-driven process. It is the member states that take the decisions. The Secretary-General does what the member states expect him to do, of course; he facilitates issues. So maybe there is need to do much more in terms how to rationalize that organization. We are not living in a jungle so therefore we are respectable people, we are supposed to play the rules of the game, but the rules have to be the same for everybody. The imbalances that exist in the rules will have to be addressed and these have not been touched on at all. Our plate is still full with issues that have not been resolved.

Q: And if things don't change what should Africa do?

A: Well Africa will have to take a political decision, whether it is worthwhile to stay in an organization that is not proving its worth. Look at the cotton producers. We managed to put that item on the agenda and everybody thought just by putting it on the agenda we would be satisfied. No. We want the issue to be addressed. It is the solution to that problem that we want, not just simply someone to come and talk about cotton and nothing is done. It is not on. I am wondering

whether it is now a case of getting together the larger developing countries, like Brazil, India, China, South Africa, etc [...] to try and become a pressure group.

Q: What does the failure of talks in Cancun mean for the poor of Africa?

A: Cancun did not deliver. Cancun did not deliver on the promises that are taken on the Millennium Development Goals, on the way to eradicate poverty, give us more access for our products, which would raise the living standards for the people of Africa, the peasants, the farmers. No such thing happened. The subsidy issue was not even addressed. In a world where people are saying that Africa is a scar on the conscience, to quote Tony Blair, a scar on the conscience of the world, and yet when you get a chance to try and heal that scar nothing is done. Nothing is being done to address that.

Q: You think pledges by developed countries to help the poor are mere rhetoric?

A: It is rhetoric. Yes we have to do this, we have to do that, for me so far - and Cancun has proven it again - it is rhetoric. Now what is going to happen in the next 14 months, I start having doubts about it because all these now will have to be negotiated in Geneva. This round is supposed to come to an end in 2004, yet when we have met and reviewed the process and what goals have been achieved, it's nothing.

Q: So what should the AU do now?

A: The AU will have to keep on pushing its position forward and keep that alliance, that historical alliance that came out of Cancun alive. And I have told our office in Geneva that they must try and work in tandem with the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries as well as the least developed countries.