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REPORT

**THIRD SESSION OF THE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE ON THE LIBERALIZATION
OF FOREIGN TRADE AND ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION IN
THE COUNTRIES OF THE ESCWA REGION
MUSCAT, 24-25 FEBRUARY 2003**

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Introduction

1. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) secretariat held the third session of the Technical Committee on the Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization in the Countries of the ESCWA Region pursuant to the provisions of resolution 214 (XIX) of 7 May 1997, concerning the establishment of a technical committee on the liberalization of foreign trade and economic globalization in the countries of the ESCWA region, and the recommendations made by the Committee at its second session, which was held in Manama on 7 and 8 April 2001, that were adopted by the twenty-first ESCWA session, which was held in Beirut from 8 to 11 May 2001.
2. This report outlines the most significant points raised during the discussions on each agenda item. The Committee adopted the report at its final meeting on 25 February 2003.

I. ORGANIZATION OF WORK AND PARTICIPANTS

A. VENUE AND DATE OF THE SESSION

3. The third session of the Technical Committee on the Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization in the Countries of the ESCWA Region was held in cooperation with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry of Oman at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Muscat on 24 and 25 February 2003.

B. PARTICIPANTS

4. Representatives of the following nine ESCWA member countries participated in the session: Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar and Yemen. The delegate of Palestine apologized for being unable to attend because of the prevailing circumstances.
5. Attending as an observer was a representative of the World Trade Organization (WTO).
6. Representatives of the private sector in Oman also attended the session at the invitation of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Oman.

C. OPENING OF THE SESSION

7. Mr. Aly Bin Masoud Al-Snaydy, Deputy Minister of Commerce and Industry of Oman and the sponsor of the session, made a statement in which he welcomed participants and thanked Bahrain for its proficient chairmanship of the second session of the Technical Committee on the Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization in the Countries of the ESCWA Region. He commended ESCWA for the endeavours it had expended in preparing for the Fourth WTO Ministerial Conference, by producing papers on WTO Agreements and related issues, and for its effective contribution to the Conference. He also commended the efforts expended by ESCWA in preparation for the Fifth WTO Ministerial Conference, that is scheduled for September 2003. He focused on the fact that it was at the Fourth Conference that Oman had participated for the first time in a WTO Ministerial Conference, and that it had been fully involved in all the coordination meetings.
8. Mr. Al-Snaydy also discussed the importance of Oman's membership of WTO and its commitment to the liberalization of trade, in keeping with the orientations of the Organization and in the interests of avoiding international isolation. He stressed that Oman was pursuing a policy of income resource diversification that would be beneficial once global markets had been opened up and customs and other barriers had been abolished in the interests of economic integration. Of particular importance was the customs union established by the Gulf Cooperation Council States and the dedicated work being undertaken with a view to instituting the Pan-Arab Free Trade Zone. He mentioned the various issues over which negotiations were currently being conducted by WTO, including agriculture and services; barriers to the import at times of disasters that threatened public health of inexpensive pharmaceutical products manufactured without the permission of the trademark holder; the so-called 'Singapore issues' related to

trade and investment; trade and competition policy; trade facilities; and transparency with respect to Government purchasing. He concluded his statement by referring to the need to prepare the ground for a united Arab position on the current WTO negotiations, and thanking ESCWA and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the private sector of Oman, which had both played an effective part in implementing the undertakings of the Sultanate with respect to WTO-related issues.

9. Ms. Thouka Al-Khalidi, Chief of the ESCWA Globalization and Regional Integration Division (GRID), delivered a statement on behalf of Ms. Mervat Tallawy, Executive Secretary of ESCWA. In that statement, Ms. Tallawy commended the progress brought about by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos since he had come to power in 1970, referring to the long history of the Sultanate and its highly important strategic location, which profoundly affected its policies and attitudes towards many issues and developments. She said that the Committee session coincided with the restructuring of ESCWA and that in 2002, new divisions had been established, including GRID, which covered the work of the Committee. She then reviewed the most important issues to be considered by the session.

10. The Executive Secretary referred to the activities undertaken by ESCWA in preparation for the Fourth WTO Ministerial Conference, which was held in Doha in November 2001: it had prepared and distributed to the relevant parties in Arab countries 25 research papers that discussed most of the issues considered at the Conference. In October 2001, one expert group meeting and one meeting at Arab ministerial level had been held at ESCWA headquarters in order to prepare for the Conference. Issues of concern to the Arab countries and the Doha Declaration and principles were discussed. The Commission had begun to prepare for the Fifth WTO Ministerial Conference, which would be held in Mexico. It was expected that more than 20 research papers would be produced and distributed well before the Conference. An expert-level meeting would be held, followed by an Arab ministerial meeting, in order to discuss the issues that would be considered in Mexico. She hoped that the endeavours expended by ESCWA would be of assistance in achieving the desired objective and, in particular, that the Arab countries would be fully aware of what was taking place in the world trade system and overcome the obstacles before them. In conclusion, the Executive Secretary thanked the Sultanate for its generosity in hosting the session, which she hoped would make recommendations appropriate to the challenges and make it possible to use the economic opportunities of globalization in order to achieve the integration of the countries of the region.

11. A statement was made by Ms. Eman Al-Doseri of the Directorate of Foreign Trade Relations in the Ministry of Commerce, who was acting as the representative of Bahrain in the place of Mr. Abdul-Razzaq Zayn Al-Abidin, Head of the Department of Foreign Trade Relations and Chairman of the previous session. She thanked Ms. Mervat Tallawy, Executive Secretary of ESCWA, and the experts, and expressed satisfaction that the Chairmanship of the session was being assumed by Oman, the host country. She was confident that the session would achieve all that the participants aspired to, thereby activating the role of the Committee and making the ESCWA member countries active participants in the WTO Agreements. She expressed gratitude to Oman, the responsible officials in international organizations and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry for hosting the session and wished the participants every success in their work.

12. Mr. Jamil Bin Aly Sultan, Deputy Director of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Oman, made a statement in which he welcomed participants to the session, which would discuss issues related to WTO Agreements and the various rounds of negotiations that were being conducted with respect to trade and economic globalization, with a view to formulating a common vision that would contribute to the strengthening of economic development in the countries of the ESCWA region. It was his belief that the session was highly important, in that it would help to standardize views on the issues and challenges faced by certain production and service sectors, thereby serving the interests of the countries of the region. He commended the efforts exerted by ESCWA in order to ensure the success of the session.

D. ELECTION OF OFFICERS

13. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia resolution 226 (XXI) concerning the election of officers for the sessions of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies provides that members shall assume the chairmanship of the sessions of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies, on a rotating basis, in Arabic

alphabetical order.* On an exceptional basis, the participants decided to elect the Chairman of the third session, and duly elected to that office, by consensus, Mr. Aly Bin Masoud Al-Snaydy, the representative of Oman. Mr. Tayseer Al-Smadi, the representative of Jordan, and Ms. Eman Al-Doseri, the representative of Bahrain, were elected as Vice-Chairmen, while Ms. Mona Al-Tannir, the representative of Lebanon, was elected as Rapporteur.

E. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND PROGRAMME OF WORK

14. In the course of its first meeting, the Committee adopted the agenda and organization of work in the form in which they appear in documents E/ESCWA/GRID/2003/IG.1/L.1 and E/ESCWA/GRID/2003/IG.1/L.2. Set forth below is the form of the agenda that was adopted:

- “1. Opening of the session.
2. Election of officers.
3. Adoption of the agenda.
4. Proposed organization of work.
5. General discussion: priority issues in the field of the liberalization of foreign trade and economic globalization:
 - (a) The current status of negotiations on the Doha programme of work for development;
 - (b) Round table: the preparations for the Fifth WTO Ministerial Conference, to be held in Mexico in September 2003;
6. Review of action taken in the field of the liberalization of foreign trade and economic globalization since the second session of the Technical Committee on the Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization:
 - (a) Follow-up to implementation of the recommendations of the second session of the Technical Committee on the Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization;
 - (b) Progress made in carrying out activities covered by the regular programme budget and funded by extrabudgetary sources during the biennium 2002-2003;
 - (c) Advisory services and technical cooperation.
7. Proposals regarding the programme of work and priorities for the biennium 2004-2005 in the field of the liberalization of foreign trade and economic globalization.
8. New developments.
9. Adoption of the report of the Committee on its third session.”

II. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

A. GENERAL DISCUSSION (Agenda item 5)

15. The aim of the Committee in devoting one agenda item to general discussion was to give representatives of member countries the opportunity to express their opinions on issues related to the session

* The Arabic alphabetized list of ESCWA member countries is as follows: Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

agenda, with a view to interchanging information and expertise and increasing the effectiveness of the session.

16. Under this agenda item, a round-table discussion was held on the second day of the session, with the aim of enriching the discussions between participants and experts from ESCWA and WTO on two issues of overriding concern to all the Arab country members of WTO and those with observer status, namely, the current status of negotiations on the Doha programme of work for development and the preparations for the Fifth WTO Ministerial Conference, to be held in Mexico in September 2003.

17. The following points were raised during the discussion:

(a) The deadline of 31 December 2002 was stipulated in the Doha Declaration for reaching a unified position with respect, in particular, to the issues of intellectual property and the Generalized System of Preferences. No agreement has yet been reached on ways of implementing within the specified period the decision contained in the Doha Declaration concerning intellectual property and public health. Similarly, no agreement exists as to a standard formulation on ways of treating the issue of special and preferential treatment for developing countries, in accordance with the provisions of the Doha Declaration;

(b) Implementation of the outcomes of the Uruguay Round is still proceeding slowly: it is important to give some impetus to the negotiations in the various committees, in order to accelerate submission to the Trade Negotiation Committee;

(c) In regard to agriculture, there is a tendency to continue to apply protection policies, which has a negative impact on wages and the related Agreements. Before the end of the period specified in the Doha Declaration, namely, by 31 March 2003, all parties must agree on ways to reduce protective measures that could distort trade;

(d) No agreement has been reached on ways of improving the dispute resolution mechanism, notwithstanding the fact that the time specified for agreement thereupon and submission thereof, namely, May 2003, is rapidly approaching;

(e) With respect to trade in services, the participating countries had exchanged requests, and the stage has been reached in which submissions are to be tendered for services in sectors and subsectors that may be liberalized, together with the conditions applicable to the penetration of markets and national procedure. The final date for this is the end of March 2003;

(f) As for the penetration of markets by non-agricultural products, many warnings have been lodged with the Negotiation Committee regarding the reduction of customs tariffs and removal or reduction of non-tariff barriers. The major problem in this case is the failure to agree upon a standard formulation for reducing customs tariffs that is agreeable to all the participating countries;

(g) There is a huge amount of information on the negotiating table with respect to trade and the environment. This must be analysed in accordance with the elements of negotiation;

(h) Participants commended the Expert Group Meeting on Regional Energy Services and WTO Implications which ESCWA held on 20 and 21 February 2003. Arab countries must formulate a view on the issues of the classification of energy services, the penetration of markets and national procedure;

(i) There should be coordination within countries between the parties concerned with WTO-related issues and between Arab negotiators at WTO;

(j) The issue of the impact of implementation of the Doha Declaration in reference to countries that have recently joined WTO, and their respective undertakings, was also raised.

B. REVIEW OF ACTION TAKEN IN THE FIELD OF THE LIBERALIZATION OF FOREIGN
TRADE AND ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION SINCE THE
SECOND SESSION OF THE COMMITTEE
(Agenda item 6)

1. *Follow-up to implementation of the recommendations of the second session
of the Technical Committee on the Liberalization of Foreign Trade
and Economic Globalization*

18. The secretariat presented this item in document E/ESCWA/GRID/2003/IG.1/3, which covered the activities undertaken by ESCWA in cooperation with the relevant international organizations. Those activities included extensive preparations for the Fourth WTO Ministerial Conference, which was held in Doha from 9 to 14 November 2001; the convening of meetings on the outcomes of the Doha Conference; the liberalization of trade in services; energy services; and the holding of training sessions on trade in services and intellectual property protection. The Commission also prepares special studies on issues relating to trade in the region and its relationship to intellectual property rights, agriculture and the environment and promotes the teaching of the WTO Agreements in the universities and institutes of higher education of member countries. Such activities are undertaken in cooperation with Sharjah University in the United Arab Emirates.

19. During discussions, the following points were raised:

(a) The effective role of ESCWA was commended. That role is apparent in the papers that it prepared on WTO Agreements and related issues. It is the sole party in the region providing such assistance to Arab countries as part of its technical assistance. Reference was also made to the additional activities undertaken by ESCWA with reference to global trade and the endeavours it exerts with a view to making available the necessary funding for those activities;

(b) The manner in which the global trade-related documents produced by ESCWA are distributed was discussed, and the feasibility of making them available to all on the ESCWA Internet site. The work undertaken by ESCWA with respect to translating WTO-related documents into Arabic was commended. There was a need for coordination between ESCWA and international and regional funding bodies in order to ensure funding for its activities;

(c) The Commission plays an important role in providing technical assistance, building capacities, preparing studies and providing training in particular issues. It was suggested that training should be provided for trainers in member countries, in order to enable them to spread ideas in their own countries. A further proposal was made to the effect that ESCWA should provide training, including the training of judges, in each member country;

(d) Each country should compile a list of its needs for training in various areas, and convey that information to the secretariat, in order to enable it to incorporate those requirements into its programmes;

(e) There was a need to establish a database of experts in the field of global trade and for ESCWA to prepare a database of its own experts and those in regional and international organizations and in Arab countries.

20. With respect to the additional activities undertaken by ESCWA, the representative of the secretariat said that ESCWA spared no effort in responding to the requests of member countries with regard to training and the preparation of reports, studies and other documents. Nevertheless, a major constraint was imposed on such activities by the limited number of resources available outside the regular budget.

2. *Progress made in carrying out activities covered by the regular programme budget
and funded by extrabudgetary sources during the biennium 2002-2003*

21. The representative of the secretariat presented this item in document E/ESCWA/GRID/2003/IG.1/4, which reviewed the progress made in carrying out activities covered by the regular programme budget and funded by extrabudgetary sources during the biennium 2002-2003.

3. *Advisory services and technical cooperation*

22. This item was presented in document E/ESCWA/GRID/2003/IG.1/5, which reviewed the training programmes and consultancy work carried out in response to requests from Government bodies in several countries of the region. Also reviewed were the working papers and studies that had been prepared.

23. During the discussion, the following points were raised:

(a) There was a need to raise Arab public awareness of the new global trade regime, WTO-related issues and the current negotiations over the Doha Declaration programme of work, and to activate the role of ESCWA in dealing with those issues. Obstacles must be removed if ESCWA were to be able to provide member countries with technical assistance in the form of training. Training was needed for judges in member countries, and consideration must also be given to intellectual property rights, the pharmaceutical sector and related policies;

(b) The gap between the private and public sectors must be narrowed, as must that between the negotiator in Geneva and the negotiators in ministries, countries and chambers of commerce. The role of the media in that must be considered, and some way other than seminars must be found of raising the awareness of businessmen: possibly by raising levels and expanding the availability of technical assistance;

(c) With respect to the mechanism for communication between ESCWA and the private sector, it was debated whether that should operate through the Government or the ministry involved;

(d) There was a need to establish a database on global trade-related issues;

(e) The Commission must build WTO-related issue capacities in various groups.

24. The representative of the secretariat clarified the point related to the raising of awareness of the new global trade regime and WTO-related issues, saying that ESCWA had taken initiatives in that respect, in the course of its preparations for the Fourth WTO Ministerial Conference, which was held in Doha, and for the Fifth WTO Ministerial Conference, which would be held in Mexico in September 2003.

25. The secretariat welcomed the suggestions that had been made with respect to the training of judges and media personnel in member countries, and said that ESCWA intended to carry out such training at the earliest possible opportunity.

C. PROPOSALS REGARDING THE PROGRAMME OF WORK AND PRIORITIES FOR THE BIENNIUM 2004-2005 IN THE FIELD OF THE LIBERALIZATION OF FOREIGN TRADE AND ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION (Agenda item 7)

26. The representative of the secretariat presented this item in document E/ESCWA/GRID/2003/IG.1/6, which reviewed the programme of work and priorities for the biennium 2004-2005 in the field of the liberalization of foreign trade and economic globalization.

27. During the discussion, the following points were raised:

(a) In the programme of work and priorities for the biennium 2004-2005, there was a need to focus on building institutional capacities in member countries. Countries should be allowed a certain period in which to review the programme and express their views thereon to the ESCWA secretariat;

(b) With respect to regional integration, attention must be paid to the issues of rules of origin, dispute settlement and ways of taking related decisions.

28. In its response, the secretariat said that ESCWA was focusing on the provision of technical assistance and capacity-building in member countries by providing consultancy services, organizing training sessions

and meetings and establishing databases. If they wished, member countries could review the programme of work and priorities for the biennium 2004-2005 and convey any pertinent proposals to the secretariat as soon as possible. The secretariat representative also referred to the ongoing cooperation and coordination between ESCWA and the General Union of Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture for Arab Countries.

D. ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON ITS THIRD SESSION
(Agenda item 9)

29. The Technical Committee on the Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization in the Countries of the ESCWA Region adopted the report on its third session.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

30. In the course of the Committee's deliberations, the following recommendations were made:

(a) In cooperation with regional and international organizations, ESCWA should include the training activities set forth below in its programme of work for the biennium 2004-2005:

(i) Training in WTO-related issues for media officials in member countries;

(ii) Preparing the judicial sector to work with issues relating to WTO. Activities to include the training of judges and their assistants and lawyers;

(iii) Training of trainers;

(iv) Allowing all member countries to participate effectively by using teleconferencing facilities;

(b) The importance should be stressed of involving both the public and private sector in establishing national committees to support and strengthen the negotiating processes involving various sectors; ESCWA and member countries with experience should provide technical services for capacity-building in that field;

(c) The Commission should monitor and keep member countries updated on the progress of the current WTO negotiations and the relevant documents should be translated into Arabic;

(d) The Commission should publish studies and reports of meetings on its Internet site;

(e) Focal points at specialist level must be identified for the Committee within member countries;

(f) Member countries must inform ESCWA, by 20 March 2003 at the latest, of any proposals regarding the programme of work and priorities for the biennium 2004-2005 in the field of foreign trade and economic globalization;

(g) Member countries should inform ESCWA of their opinions and views on the various activities that it undertakes in that field;

(h) The sessions of the Technical Committee on the Liberalization of Foreign Trade and Economic Globalization in the Countries of the ESCWA Region should be held annually rather than biennially.

Annex

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

A. ESCWA MEMBER COUNTRIES

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