

13 January 2017

Fourth Session of the Ministerial Council The Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement

Ministerial Declaration

We, the Ministers of Participating States of the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA), gathered today on 13 January 2017 in Bangkok, Thailand, for the Fourth Session of the Ministerial Council, reaffirming our commitment to the principles and objectives of the Ministerial Declarations previously adopted by us.

We are very pleased to conclude the fourth round of negotiations under the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement, which will result in a significant deepening of preferential tariff concessions among APTA Participating States. As has been agreed by us, APTA Participating States will provide at least 33 per cent tariff concessions measured as an average of Margin of Preference (MOP) for all products covered, except in the case of least developed Participating States and Sri Lanka, who were granted greater flexibility in meeting these requirements. In addition, the preferences under APTA will cover over 10,000 items. We agree to implement the results of the fourth round of negotiations as well as the Sectoral Rules of Origin at the latest by the 1st of July 2017 subject to completion of domestic procedure.

We are pleased to note that the Framework Agreements on trade facilitation; the promotion, protection and liberalization of investment; and the promotion and liberalization of trade in services have been ratified by all Participating States of APTA to date. We direct the Standing Committee to undertake impact assessment of fourth round concessions and take suitable actions for further liberalization, including exploring the possibility of economic and technical cooperation in new areas. In this regard, we instruct the Standing Committee to form Working Groups and commence negotiations on commitments in the areas of trade facilitation, investment, trade in services with a view to concluding these negotiations preferably by the end of 2018. In consideration of the importance of tariff concessions, we will undertake necessary measures to obtain a mandate for launching the fifth round of negotiation on trade in goods, preferably by the end of 2017. We commit to commence negotiations in trade in goods in parallel with other tracks as early as possible. We direct the Standing Committee to decide the modalities for negotiations on the above issues.

We observe that progress has been made in the area of Non-Tariff Measures (NTMs), in particular with respect to the exchange of information on NTMs as well as the NTM database created by the APTA Secretariat on its web site, and reaffirm our commitment to continue and broaden the work in this area. With a view to achieving greater transparency, reducing or eliminating Non-Tariff Barriers for expansion of intra-regional trade among the Participating States, we direct the Standing Committee to explore developing appropriate mechanisms like mutual recognition agreements, harmonization etc. so as to address the issues relating to the NTMs, including Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) issues.

We reaffirm our commitment on a priority basis to expand the membership of the Agreement to evolve it into a truly pan-Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement and reiterate our support to Mongolia in becoming a new Participating State of APTA after she completes her internal procedures. We also wish to welcome any other country of the ESCAP region.

We are fully aware that trade integration in the region is progressing rapidly and that APTA has to move forward to maintain relevance and continue generating greater benefits associated with South-South trade and development cooperation. We emphasize the centrality of a rules based, transparent and inclusive multilateral trading system embodied in the WTO. We underline the importance of concluding the Doha Development Agenda, while preserving the centrality of development, in line with the commitments made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

We welcome the Standing Committee's decision to continue discussions on the outstanding issues on APTA Rules of Origin which will encourage exporters of all Participating States to increase the utilization of tariff preferences. We encourage the Participating States to further study the possibility of introducing the systematic exchange and capture of preferential trade data and the statistics, and the issuance of electronic Certificate of Origin amongst the Participating States. We request the Secretariat to conduct studies and disseminate information thereof for this purpose and we instruct the Standing Committee to continue its works on this issue. We also request ESCAP to continue providing technical assistance and necessary support in this regard.

Trade and investment have been instrumental in Asia-Pacific in reducing poverty, empowering women, achieving inclusive and sustainable growth and decent employment. While noting that international trade is an engine for sustained economic growth and development, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development stressed the need to further mainstream sustainable development at all levels, integrating economic, social and environmental aspects and recognizing their inter-linkages, so as to achieve sustainable development in all its dimensions. We noted that the 4th Round concessions include certain items which have been identified as climate smart goods and technologies by ESCAP. It is important that APTA contributes its efforts towards promotion of green trade and investment within APTA Participating States. We request the APTA Secretariat to work in this area and provide necessary research inputs and technical assistance, especially to the LDC Participating States and Sri Lanka so that APTA Participating States can promote trade, investment and technology in this area.

We also agree to set up the APTA Chamber of Commerce and Industry (APTA CCI), as recommended by the Standing Committee. We note that its first meeting will be held in Sri Lanka in 2017 and believe that APTA CCI will pave the way for better interaction between private sectors as well as with their respective governments in promoting linkages between APTA Participating States.

We reiterate our appreciation to the APTA Secretariat for providing effective secretariat services to the implementation of the Agreement and reaffirm our commitment to fully support the Secretariat's activities related to APTA. We also appreciate the efforts of Secretariat for starting new initiatives on compilation of NTMs and RoO database as well as facilitating discussions on issuance of electronic Certificate of Origin and electronic origin data exchange system.

We express our gratitude to the APTA Secretariat under the auspices of ESCAP for graciously hosting the Fourth Session of the Ministerial Council of the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement in Bangkok, Thailand on 13 January 2017, and Sri Lanka for their generous offer to host the Fifth Session of the Ministerial Council of the Agreement in January, 2019.

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