

Find new paths for stalled WTO talks: S'pore

By **LEE U-WEN**

[SINGAPORE] The 153 members of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) should explore new ways to overcome the current Doha Round impasse, said Singapore's Minister of State for Trade and Industry Lee Yi Shyan.

The fact that talks have been in a stalemate for the last 10 years meant that the agenda was becoming increasingly dated, he said at the start of the three-day inaugural WTO Policy Dialogue here yesterday.

"Could it be that we need to scale down the complexity of trade negotiations by reducing the number of issues so that we can conclude negotiations more quickly? How do we then ensure that there is no cherry-picking of issues?" said Mr Lee in his keynote speech to some 50 senior trade officials from 24 countries.

Singapore, he stressed, was "disappointed" that the WTO would not be able to conclude the Doha Round talks this year, for doing so would have provided a much needed stimulus package for the stuttering global economy.

Mr Lee said it was timely to take a deeper look at how the WTO could be updated to take into account recent global developments, such as the ways in which countries deal with investment and competition policy issues at the multilateral level, which are now the norm in most free trade agreements.

There are also other "contemporary concerns" to consider, including climate change, food security and exchange rates and trade, he said.

"How do we ensure that countries will not use environmental concerns as a cover for protectionism? How can we find the delicate balance between the need to reduce the number of issues so that we can conclude the negotiations, but at the same time address new issues not currently on the agenda so that trade rules are updated for the 21st century?" he asked.

The Doha round was launched in late-2001 with the goal of helping poor countries prosper through trade. The WTO's members, however, have disagreed over how much wealthy countries should

cut farm subsidies and tariffs on farm and manufactured goods in exchange for developing countries opening their own markets in agriculture, manufacturing and services.

Ahead of the WTO ministerial conference in Geneva this December, Mr Lee noted how many observers had already commented that the Doha stalemate had "tempered enthusiasm" for the multilateral trading system.

"We are at a point where the threat of another economic recession – with a debt crisis in the eurozone and a weakening US economy – may lead to a re-

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Singapore's Minister of
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surge of protectionist tendencies," he said.

"It is important that the ministerial conference succeed in providing guidance for the WTO to start the new year productively on the Doha Development Agenda and address the many issues and challenges that confront the WTO."

The world body's chief economist Patrick Low, who flew in from Switzerland to attend the dialogue, said that the WTO was "much more" than just the Doha Round.

"We should remember that the WTO is a system of rules, a mechanism for settling disputes and a vehicle for transparency and policy dialogue, as well as a negotiating forum," he said. "A struggling Doha Round is no reason to despair of the WTO. That would be a costly mistake of historical proportions."