

WORLD

Reform urged for WTO on free, fair trade

Less developed countries want more involvement, UAE conference hears

By JAN YUMUL in Hong Kong
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In the face of many challenges, developing and least-developed countries have urged for reforms in the World Trade Organization to ensure multilateral cooperation, fair and free trade, and the normalization of dispute settlement mechanisms.

These issues were highlighted during the WTO's 13th Ministerial Conference as the three-day event opened in Abu Dhabi on Monday.

Thani bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, the United Arab Emirates' minister of state for foreign trade and chair of the conference, said the growth of WTO membership and its diverse priorities "requires a dynamic approach from the WTO", one that "respects the rules that bind us all as WTO members", but also "enables the WTO to advance" to "achieve our collective goals".

"The multilateral trading system — with the WTO at its core — is at a critical juncture, confronting many challenges. We have witnessed the shifting of priorities and addressing climate change and sustainability issues," Al Zeyoudi said.

He noted that many countries were experiencing debt, as well as cost of living pressures, food security issues, and slow recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The conference "can be the launchpad of the future of global trade and reform" and the WTO is prepared to address current and future challenges, he added.

The WTO currently has 164 members and the ministers formally approved membership terms for Comoros and Timor-Leste on Feb 26.

Al Zeyoudi also said the WTO "remains a powerful force, encountering the current unilateral protectionism and discrimination" and remains "an important part of global efforts" to attain the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

In her speech, WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said that on the high-priority issue of dispute settlement reform, ambassadors have heeded ministers' charge to work on delivering a fully and well-functioning system accessible to all members this year.

She noted that some members would like to formalize the process under the Dispute Settlement Body post-conference while others, especially the least-developed countries, would like to find ways to participate more going forward.

"I hope ministers will recognize the progress made through the various contributions and will instruct their teams in Geneva to

accelerate discussions, build on progress, and work on unresolved issues," Okonjo-Iweala said.

She said some members were still using the dispute settlement system to resolve disputes, sometimes "in very creative ways". She said eight disputes have recently been settled bilaterally at the WTO, with seven more in the process of resolution.

"Alternative mechanisms to resolve disputes were always available at the WTO — but now members are making more use of them," Okonjo-Iweala said. "These important tools ensure that WTO rules are being followed."

At the 12th China Round Table on WTO Accessions held on Feb 24 and 25, China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao said China has always supported developing countries, including Arab states, to integrate into the multilateral trading system and insists on benefiting the whole world with its own development.

Cooperation highlighted

Further, China will continue to carry out South-South cooperation within the framework of the multilateral trading system, enhance the openness, inclusiveness, universality and balance of the multilateral trading system, implement its Global Development Initiative with practical actions, and promote the building of a global community of a shared future for development.

Sujoko Efferin, a professor at the Faculty of Business and Economics at Universitas Surabaya in Indonesia, said China's strategic economic and technological strength "plays a crucial role in promoting inclusivity and ensuring that the voices of least-developed countries are heard and considered in the WTO's decision-making processes".

The recent China round table focused on how trade and active participation in the WTO could foster economic development and resilience, especially for the Arab region.

According to the WTO, the Arab region is "one of the most under-represented". Of the 22-member Arab League, only 13 are WTO members, while nine are observers.

Gokhan Erel, Gulf studies coordinator at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies in Türkiye, said the Abu Dhabi meeting reflects the Gulf states' ambitions to play a more prominent role in shaping international trade policies and norms at a time of global uncertainties.

"The meeting's focus on key trade issues, such as dispute resolution, e-commerce and agriculture, aligns with the Gulf's economic diversification goals and its interest in maintaining regional stability," Erel said.

Graduating ladies



Graduates gesture at a high school graduation ceremony in Seoul, South Korea, on Tuesday. The school provides middle and high school study courses for female students more than 40 years old who have not been able to complete their studies due to various reasons. YONHAP

Peace talks sans Russia absurd: Kremlin

By REN QI in Moscow
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The Kremlin said on Monday that the idea of holding peace talks without Russia was ridiculous, after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said he hoped to hold a spring summit in Switzerland to discuss his peace vision with Kyiv's allies.

"We have repeatedly said that this is a strange format, to say the least, because certain peace plans are being implemented without the participation of Russia, which in itself is frivolous and even laughable," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

The remarks were made after Zelensky's chief of staff Andriy Yermak said on Sunday that a blueprint from the summit in Switzerland could be handed to Russia at a later date.

Moscow has repeatedly said it is open to talks, but that these must recognize the "new realities on the ground". Ukraine demands the restoration of its territorial integrity and a full withdrawal of Russian forces.

At a gathering of nearly 20 Euro-

pean leaders in Paris on Monday, French President Emmanuel Macron said the consensus among European leaders was that more efforts are needed to help Ukraine financially and militarily.

"There is no consensus at this stage ... to send troops on the ground," Macron told reporters. "Nothing should be excluded. We will do everything that we must so that Russia does not win."

Macron invited his European counterparts to the Elysee Palace for a hastily arranged meeting to discuss how to ramp up ammunition supplies to Ukraine amid what his advisers say is an escalation in the Russian offensive over the past few weeks.

"We all agree we don't want to go to war with the Russian people, but we're determined to keep escalation under control," said Macron, adding that the meeting was meant to see how to "do more in terms of military support and budget support".

Addressing the leaders via video link, Zelensky backed Macron's warning about an escalation of the conflict. He warned earlier on Sunday that Russia was preparing for a

new offensive starting in late May or summer, but Kyiv has a clear battlefield plan of its own.

As the conflict now enters its third year, Ukraine has suffered setbacks on eastern battlefields, with its generals complaining of shortages of arms and soldiers.

Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico said on Monday that several NATO and European Union members are considering sending soldiers to Ukraine on a bilateral basis.

Fico offered no details and other European leaders did not immediately comment on his remarks.

He said this ahead of a meeting of European leaders in Paris on Monday. "I will limit myself to say that these (in preparation for the Paris meeting) imply a number of NATO and EU member states are considering that they will send their troops to Ukraine on a bilateral basis," Fico said after a meeting of Slovakia's security council.

NATO made no immediate comments on Fico's remarks, and Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said his country "certainly is not preparing to send any soldiers to Ukraine".

Briefly

JAPAN
4th nuke water release to resume despite backlash

Japan is set to start its fourth round of release of the nuclear-contaminated water from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant into the Pacific Ocean on Wednesday, local media reported. Despite raging concerns and opposition both at home and abroad, Tokyo Electric Power Company announced that it would start discharging about 7,800 tons of the water, in a similar amount to the previous three rounds, over about 17 days. Amid chilly winds in Tokyo, residents took to the street to oppose the upcoming ocean release. They also voiced concerns over the recent leakage of contaminated water from pipes at the Fukushima plant, as well as potential safety hazards for the disaster-prone country in light of the Noto Peninsula earthquake.

COLOMBIA
Govt, rebels to resume stalled negotiations

Colombia's government and the ELN guerrilla group said on Monday they will resume peace talks which the rebels had put on hold last week. In a joint statement in Havana — hosting talks that were held up for several days — the parties said they would "continue with the activities set out" in earlier agreements as they prepare for another round of negotiations in Venezuela in April. Last week, the ELN declared the process "frozen" until further notice, prompting the government to blame the guerrillas for unnecessarily prolonging the country's decades-old armed conflict.

UNITED STATES
Lunar lander to end mission in advance

US company Intuitive Machines' first lunar lander Odysseus will lose control and end its mission earlier than expected, the company said on Monday. The lander will lose communication with flight controllers in Houston due to its solar panels off work by early morning Tuesday. This will cut the mission short for two to three days from a week expected by NASA and other customers, according to US media reports. The uncrewed lander touched down at the lunar South Pole last Thursday.

XINHUA — AGENCIES

Pentagon absolves itself after Austin's hospitalization

WASHINGTON — An internal review blames privacy restrictions and staff hesitancy for the Pentagon's failure last month to quickly notify the president and other senior leaders about Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's hospitalization for complications from prostate cancer surgery.

The review, which was carried out by Austin's subordinates, largely absolves anyone of wrongdoing for the secrecy surrounding his hospitalization, which included several days in the intensive care unit. And it says flatly there was "no indication of ill intent or an attempt to obfuscate".

Instead, the 30-day examination of the lapse — which angered the White House and members of Con-

gress — says procedures must be improved and information shared better when the defense secretary has to transfer decision-making authorities to the deputy.

Austin was called to Capitol Hill on Thursday for a House hearing on the matter and is expected to face sharp criticism. The Defense Department's inspector general is also conducting a review, which has not yet been completed.

Austin was diagnosed with prostate cancer in early December and went to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for surgery on Dec 22. On Jan 1, he was taken back to Walter Reed by ambulance after experiencing significant pain and was moved to the intensive care unit the next day.



Lloyd Austin

Although he transferred decision-making authorities to Deputy Secretary Kathleen Hicks during his initial surgery, and then again when he was in intensive care, he did not tell her why and did not inform the White House.

Pentagon officials have acknowledged that public affairs and defense aides were told on Jan 2, that Austin had been hospitalized but did not make it public and did not tell the military service leaders or the National Security Council until Jan 4. Only then did President

Joe Biden find out. It took four more days before the reason for his hospitalization was disclosed.

Defense officials released an unclassified summary of the review on Monday and a set of recommended changes. The review suggests there was no established method for such an incident, and the fact that his hospitalization was "unplanned" contributed to the failure to let others know.

It also says Austin's staff was limited by medical privacy laws that prohibited doctors from providing health information and they "were hesitant to pry or share any information they did learn".

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

International Education Column

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