

Two Days Informal WTO Ministerial Concludes in New Delhi

India hosted the informal WTO Ministerial Meeting at New Delhi on 19-20 March 2018. The main aim of the meeting was to once again rejuvenate the spirit of multilateral trade, the Doha Development Agenda (DDA), and of negotiations between the developed and the developing countries. India took this initiative by inviting over 40 countries with the objective of facilitating an exchange of views on various issues and challenges relating to the multilateral trading system. This was the second mini-ministerial meeting being hosted by India, after the first one held in 2009 in New Delhi. This meeting has gained significance because of the absence of ministerial guidance at the WTO 11th MC, which took place in Argentina's Buenos Aires in December last year.

The meeting took place against the backdrop of imposition of import duties on steel and aluminum by the US administration, and in the aftermath of failure of the trade talks at Buenos Aires last year on account of differences among the members of the WTO.

The issue central to the said mini ministerial was the debate on agricultural trade. As a majority of the population of the developing countries depends upon agriculture, food security and livelihood therefore become the prime concerns. What merits attention is to understand the intricacies of agricultural trade and how this trade is currently highly asymmetrical in nature and needs to be settled in a manner that provides a level-playing field to the developing countries—what developing countries have been arguing since the commencement of the Doha ministerial in 2001. Agricultural trade needs to be understood in the perspective of market access, domestic subsidy and export competition, which are the main planks of this contentious issue.

From the developing countries' perspective, the key issues that need to be settled are the designation of Special Products (SP) and the agreement over the coverage of Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM). The developing countries want to designate a set of SPs, which are critical from the viewpoint of their food security, livelihood and rural development. In addition, the SSM may be available to them as a defense against a sudden surge in imports or the fall in international commodity prices.

Many developing countries opposed bringing in new issues such as e-commerce, micro, small and medium enterprises, investment facilitation, etc., to the fold of the WTO negotiations, before concluding the existing issues under the Doha Development Agenda.

The meeting concluded with fruitful discussions amongst all participating countries on the afore-stated debated topics.