

JOINT COMMUNIQUE ISSUED AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE CARICOM/MERCOSUR MINISTERIAL MEETING, 24-25 FEBRUARY 2005, PORT -OF-SPAIN, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

CARICOM and MERCOSUR met at Ministerial level in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad on 24-25 February 2005 to continue discussions on the possibilities for negotiating a Free Trade Agreement to enhance trade and investment linkages between both Regions.

CARICOM Ministerial Spokesperson on Bilateral Trade Negotiations, Honourable Kenneth Valley, Minister of Trade and Industry of Trinidad and Tobago in welcoming the MERCOSUR delegation, led by Honourable Leila Rachid de Cowles, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Paraguay, expressed the hope that CARICOM and MERCOSUR would move quickly to conclude a Free Trade Agreement by the end of 2005. Minister Rachid de Cowles confirmed the interest of MERCOSUR in negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with CARICOM which would take account of the differences in levels of development of the countries of both regions. She looked forward to the early commencement of negotiations. Both Ministers highlighted the benefits of enhanced trade relations to the private sector through new trade and investment opportunities.

The technical discussions which followed were co-chaired by Ambassador Richard Bernal, Director General of the Caribbean Regional Negotiating Machinery (CRNM) on behalf of CARICOM and Ambassador Rubén Ramírez Lezcano, Common Market Group Co-ordinator of Paraguay on behalf of MERCOSUR. MERCOSUR Officials outlined the region's vision for the scope and content of a possible free trade agreement with CARICOM which would place emphasis on trade in goods, services and investment. The agreement would enshrine the principle of special and differential treatment and would include asymmetrical treatment to deal with sensitivities of all Parties. In addition MERCOSUR would be ready to assist with technical co-operation to CARICOM countries.

CARICOM welcomed the thrust of MERCOSUR's approach and highlighted the importance of maintaining the integrity of its regional integration process in any enhanced trade arrangements with MERCOSUR. While acknowledging the importance of trade in goods, the CARICOM co-chair highlighted the region's interest in developing a platform for increased trade in services, in particular tourism services, and the promotion of investment between CARICOM and MERCOSUR.

Both sides engaged in an exchange of information related to the status of implementation of their respective integration processes, bilateral trade agreements concluded by both regions as well as rules applied to intra-regional trade. They also discussed their respective tariff structures and agreed to exchange trade data. Both sides recognized the need for more indepth exchanges on some of the issues which emerged during the Meeting and agreed to meet again promptly. A decision on the negotiation of a Free Trade Agreement with MERCOSUR will be taken by CARICOM Trade Ministers at their next meeting scheduled for May 2005.

*Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago
February 25, 2005*