

## EFTA Ministerial meeting, Geneva, Switzerland, 14 November 2011

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Mr Trond Giske, Norwegian Minister of Trade and Industry, chairing the EFTA Ministerial Meeting in Geneva on 14 November 2011

On 14 November 2011, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) held a Ministerial Meeting in Geneva under the Chairmanship of Mr Trond Giske, Minister of Trade and Industry of Norway. Ministers from the four EFTA Member States and Montenegro signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Together with Costa Rica, Honduras and Panama, the EFTA Ministers announced the start of free trade negotiations.

### **The international economic and trade environment**

The EFTA Ministers discussed the current international economic and trade environment. They emphasised the importance of promoting policies to enhance growth and financial and economic stability at European and international level. They reiterated their strong commitment to the multilateral trading system. In view of the upcoming WTO Ministerial Conference the Ministers expressed their deep concerns over the lack of progress in the WTO/Doha negotiations and recognised that, in order to deliver on the Doha mandate, there is a need to explore new negotiating approaches.

### **EFTA-Montenegro Free Trade Agreement**

The EFTA Ministers welcomed the addition of the Free Trade Agreement with Montenegro to EFTA's network of agreements, thereby bringing the total to 24 FTAs with 33 countries and territories outside the European Union. EFTA now has five FTAs with partners in South-Eastern Europe.

## **Announcement of negotiations with Central American partners**

The EFTA Ministers States announced the start of negotiations on a comprehensive free trade agreement with Costa Rica, Honduras and Panama. Both sides declared their readiness to open negotiations early next year. Other Central American countries may join the process at a later stage.

## **Other preferential trade relations**

The EFTA Ministers reviewed the state of and the outlook for preferential trade relations with partners worldwide. They welcomed the significant progress made in the negotiations with India and expressed the wish that these could be finalised in early 2012. They also welcomed the progress achieved in 2011 in the negotiating process with the Members of the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. In this context, they expressed their great satisfaction with the recent conclusion of the negotiations on Russia's accession to the WTO. Ministers further noted the positive developments in the negotiations between EFTA and Indonesia. They took note of the progress achieved in the negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and looked forward to a rapid finalisation of the Agreement.

Ministers expressed their desire to continue the dialogue with Malaysia with the aim of launching free trade negotiations. Based on a Joint Feasibility Study at technical level with Vietnam, they looked forward to opening negotiations as soon as possible. They also confirmed their interest in exploring ways to further develop trade relations with MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay). The Ministers discussed prospects for developing closer trade relations with countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and decided to explore the possibilities with potential partner countries in the region. They furthermore concurred to follow developments in Algeria and Thailand with a view to resuming negotiations with those partners when conditions allow.

## **Further liberalisation of intra-EFTA trade in agricultural products**

Ministers endorsed the outcome of discussions at technical level on the further liberalisation of trade in agricultural products among the EFTA Member States.

## **The EFTA Parliamentary Committee**

Ministers exchanged views with the EFTA Parliamentary Committee on recent developments and priorities in EFTA's trade relations with the world.

## **Appointments**

To succeed Secretary-General Kåre Bryn on 1 September 2012, Ministers appointed Ambassador Kristinn F. Árnason of Iceland. They also appointed Mr Ivo Kaufmann of Switzerland to the post of Deputy Secretary-General in Geneva. Norway will nominate a candidate to the post of Deputy Secretary-General in Brussels to be appointed at a later stage. Ministers furthermore appointed Mr Georges Baur of Liechtenstein as Assistant Secretary-General in Brussels.

## **Attending:**

Norway: Mr Trond Giske, Minister of Trade and Industry (Chair)

Iceland: Mr Einar Gunnarsson, Permanent Secretary of State of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and External Trade

Liechtenstein: Ms Aurelia Frick, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Switzerland: Mr Johann N. Schneider-Ammann, Federal Councillor, Head of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs

EFTA: Mr Kåre Bryn, Secretary-General