



EFTA held its spring Ministerial meeting in Zurich, Switzerland, on 19 June 2000 under the chairmanship of Federal Councillor, Pascal Couchepin, Switzerland. Ministers welcomed the progress made by EFTA States in extending their network of contractual relations. They signed a free trade agreement with Macedonia and declarations on co-operation with Croatia and Ukraine. They noted that negotiations on a free trade agreement with Canada were nearly concluded and that differences had been narrowed down to a limited number of issues that needed to be resolved at a political level. They expressed their readiness to conclude these negotiations rapidly and urged the Canadian Government to make every effort to this effect. Ministers noted with satisfaction the recent signing of a declaration on co-operation with the Gulf Co-operation Council. They reviewed the state of play of the relations with Mexico and Chile and decided to open formal negotiations. Ministers also discussed developments in Asia, where initiatives were under way to engage in regional trade arrangements. The EEA EFTA Ministers emphasized that efforts should be continued to further enhance the EEA EFTA States' participation in the decision-shaping process of EEA-relevant EC legislation and EU programmes. The determination expressed at the EU Lisbon Summit to complete the Internal Market and the measures towards a knowledge-based economy would also benefit the EEA co-operation. Ministers reaffirmed their support of the enlargement of the EU and thereby also the EEA and underscored the importance of continued evaluation and dialogue of the implications of enlargement on EFTA and the EEA Agreement. The Ministers expressed gratitude for their outstanding contribution to the Association to Mr. Kjartan Jóhannsson, the Secretary-General and the Deputy Secretaries-General, Mr. Aldo Matteucci and Mr. Guttorm Vik, who will leave their functions in the coming months.

EFTA Third-Country Relations

Ministers expressed satisfaction at the continued expansion of EFTA's network of contractual relations. The signature that very day of a free trade agreement with Macedonia and of declarations on co-operation with Croatia and Ukraine represented an important step towards completing EFTA's network of partner countries in South-Eastern and Eastern Europe. They recalled that their partnership with these countries was part of the common European effort to bring peace and stability to the region and reaffirmed their commitment to making a substantial contribution to the development in this part of Europe.

Ministers noted that negotiations on a free trade agreement with Canada were nearly finalised and that differences had been narrowed down to a limited number of issues that needed to be resolved at a political level. They expressed their readiness to conclude these negotiations rapidly and urged the Canadian Government to make every effort to this effect. Ministers underlined the importance they attached to this agreement, which would for the first time extend EFTA free trade relations across the Atlantic.

Ministers also noted with satisfaction that a declaration on co-operation with the Gulf Co-operation Council had been signed last month. This could be the first step towards the opening of negotiations on a free trade agreement when the time would be ripe.

Furthermore, Ministers also welcomed the progress made in the Mediterranean region. They noted with satisfaction that negotiations on a free trade agreement with Jordan were nearly concluded. A negotiating round had taken place with Egypt and contacts had been renewed with Tunisia with the aim of concluding negotiations on free trade agreements as soon as possible. Ministers noted that also Lebanon had expressed interest in holding exploratory talks with the EFTA States. They reiterated the importance of establishing cumulation of origin between EFTA, EU and their Mediterranean partners in order to allow them to reap the full benefits of the agreements.

Ministers reviewed the state of play of the EFTA States' relations with Mexico and Chile and decided to open formal negotiations. They noted that the EFTA States were thus set to extend their free trade network in the Americas. Ministers also reviewed the situation with regard to the EFTA States' relations with South Africa

and stressed the importance of continuing preparations for negotiations on a free trade agreement.

Ministers also discussed developments in Asia, where initiatives were under way to engage in regional trade arrangements by countries such as Singapore, South Korea and Japan. They recognised the need to study actively these developments and agreed to review the situation at their next meeting in December.

Ministers recalled that these developments were in line with the traditional EFTA policy of making a dynamic and independent contribution to improving economic conditions across Europe and beyond and of forging strong links with trading partners outside the continent, as stated in their declarations adopted at their meetings in Bergen in 1995 and, more recently, in Geneva in December 1999.

EFTA-EU co-operation

The EEA EFTA Ministers welcomed the continued good functioning of the EEA Agreement and expressed satisfaction at the increased rate of decision-taking. They emphasized that efforts should be continued to further enhance the EEA EFTA States' participation in the decision-making process of EEA-relevant EC legislation and EU programmes. The determination expressed at the EU Lisbon Summit to complete the Internal Market and the measures towards a knowledge-based economy would also benefit the EEA cooperation.

Ministers expressed hope for the completion of Community procedures allowing for a rapid finalisation of Protocol 3 to the EEA Agreement on processed agricultural products. Ministers welcomed the recent decision establishing an agreed basis for continued transitional measures for Liechtenstein in the field of free movement of persons. Ministers noted that the decision on a new financial instrument providing for an additional contribution of the EEA EFTA States towards the goal of further reducing economic and social disparities in the European Economic Area had been well received by the EEA Council.

Ministers reaffirmed their support of the enlargement of the EU and thereby also the EEA and underscored the importance of continued evaluation and dialogue of the implications of enlargement on EFTA and the EEA Agreement. They welcomed the agreement to entrust the EEA Joint Committee to assess the situation.

Ministers expressed satisfaction that the Agreements on Mutual Recognition of Conformity Assessment concluded between the EEA EFTA States and Australia and New Zealand had entered into force, and a corresponding agreement with Canada would be signed in the summer. These agreements, which were based on Protocol 12 of the EEA Agreement and paralleled corresponding EU agreements, would facilitate trade with these countries.

EFTA activities

Ministers noted the ongoing work on the update of the EFTA Convention, which takes into account the Swiss-EU bilateral Agreements as well as developments in multilateral trade policy and relations with free trade partners. The aim is to have the amendments enter into force at the same time as the Swiss-EU bilateral Agreements.

Advisory Bodies

Ministers underlined the importance of the work of the EFTA advisory bodies; the Parliamentary Committee and the Consultative Committee, representing EFTA's social partners, and welcomed their constructive contributions to the work of the Association. EFTA Parliamentarians, in co-operation with their colleagues in the European Parliament, had focused on the question of homogeneity and the EEA in the light of developments in the EU and had called on both sides to engage in closer co-operation and adopt new arrangements in areas such as justice and home affairs. Enjoying fruitful co-operation with their counterparts in the EU and the EU candidate countries, the EFTA social partners had dealt with issues such as the European Single Currency, the new strategy for the Internal Market and the Northern Dimension.

WTO

Ministers expressed their commitment to continued trade liberalisation within the multilateral trading system and reaffirmed their support to the launching of a new WTO Round of negotiations as soon as possible. They remained convinced that the launch of a new Round would offer a significant boost to economic growth worldwide. Ministers agreed that such negotiations should be broad-based and have an inclusive agenda. They also stressed the importance of ongoing negotiations on the accession of new Members to the WTO.

Farewell to the Secretaries-General

The EFTA Ministers expressed gratitude for their outstanding contribution to the Association to Mr. Kjartan Jóhannsson, the Secretary-General and the Deputy Secretaries-General, Mr. Aldo Matteucci and Mr. Guttorm Vik, who will leave their functions in the coming months.

Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Council at Ministerial level would take place in Geneva, Switzerland on 12 and 13 December 2000.

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