

United front and best EPA, Pacific ACP trade ministers urged

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Suva, Fiji, 10 April 2014/ FL/ PN: Fiji's Trade Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum has called on Pacific ACP Trade Ministers to remain firm and united ahead of talks with the European Union (EU) for a comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA).

He told trade ministers of the Pacific ACP member countries that the decision they make will not only shape their immediate future but the long term development of the region as well.

"Fellow Ministers, we are at a juncture where we need to ask the following pertinent questions. "Is it still in our interest to pursue a Comprehensive EPA? If yes, do we go forward as a single region? How can we achieve an EPA that benefits us all?"

"The only answer to that is to negotiate as a united, cohesive and effective Pacific ACP group," Sayed-Khaiyum said.

Although a decade has lapsed since talks for a comprehensive EPA began, Fiji he says has continued negotiations because of its belief that the people of the region deserved a better EPA deal not for the immediate future, but for generations to come.

"We want only one EPA for the region, which will promote regional integration and not divide us," Sayed-Khaiyum said.

"In order to have one EPA - and I know that is what we all want - we need to address Papua New Guinea's participation in the negotiations. It is encouraging to note that PNG has agreed to come to the table as an observer.

"We need to think beyond tomorrow, and the next 5 years or the next 20 years. We need to ensure that our future generations are secure. Hence, we cannot and will not let a trade agreement diminish our ability to deliver to our people basic socio-economic rights, which include the right to housing, education, health, food and the right to economic participation."

He said there was only one option for the region and that was to have one EPA "that has a strong development aspect and that does not impinge on our sovereignty and policy space."

Leaders, he pointed out, need to meet to consider some of the fundamental issues, as to how they can take ownership of the EPA negotiations and its implementation after conclusion of negotiations.

Fiji he says will not be party to an agreement that provides short term market access, but have a long term negative impact on its development aspirations as a nation and its ability to have control over its resources and economies.

"Fellow Ministers, it is up to us to set the direction of these negotiations- whether to continue and finalise then by May/June 2014 or suspend them, keeping in mind that a new European Parliament will be elected in May and a new Trade Commissioner will take office in September," Sayed-Khaiyum said.

"We have to decide the best option. We have to ask ourselves whether we are just going through the motions and will not achieve anything. We have to ask ourselves should we redirect our limited resources elsewhere.

"Ministers, as I stated earlier, we want an EPA that is development oriented. Therefore, the Development Cooperation Chapter in the comprehensive EPA is a crucial element in any decision we make."

He further said the region needed a well negotiated EPA that sets a precedent for all other trade agreements that are currently being negotiated or will be negotiated in the future, such as the PACER Plus with Australia and New Zealand.

The ministers meeting continues in Suva.

(Photo: Fiji Trade Minister Aiyaz Sayed Khaiyum)

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