

Our Presenter of this morning, Prof. Gerhard Erasmus,

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have the honour to welcome you this morning to what is today the 10<sup>th</sup> Public Dialogue on Trade – a joint venture between the Namibian Agricultural Trade Forum (ATF), the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and sometimes other Namibian partners, like the Meat Board of Namibia, who is the third stakeholder in today’s event.

I am delighted to see you here in such large numbers and I trust that this is not just for the lack of alternatives because the workshop circus in Windhoek hasn’t started yet in earnest.

Like the last public dialogue on trade in November last year, today’s discussion deals again with a deadline. I believe it was a convicted murderer on death row who once said that *“it helps concentrating your mind, if you know that you are going to be hanged the next morning at the break of dawn”*. I am not sure, if this is where the word “deadline” actually comes from. But what is sure is that deadlines are important tools to get things moving – and normally trade negotiations are no exception to that rule. In the negotiations between the European Union and the six groupings of ACP countries which are currently negotiating Economic Partnership Agreements or EPAs which – stripped of all euphemistic language – are going to be Free Trade Agreements (FTA) – there exists this end-of-2007-deadline.

End of 2007 is the deadline by when the so-called “waiver” from WTO-rules requested by the EU under the Cotonou Agreement for the extension of unilateral preferences for African, Caribbean and Pacific countries (from the old Lomé IV Convention) will expire and come to an end. End of 2007 is therefore also the deadline by which the current preferential market access for Namibian agricultural products which has helped Namibian producers to sell a substantial part of its beef, lamb and table grape production to consumers in Europe and earn a fair amount of foreign exchange for the country comes to an end.

Now, despite of the power of deadlines which I just mentioned, Namibia has to face the real possibility that the current arrangement is not going to be replaced in time by a new and WTO-compatible agreement, this so-called EPA. (And Jürgen Hoffmann, from the ATF, who himself is intimately involved in this

EPA-negotiations can tell you more about it during the discussion, if there is an interest).

If negotiations are not going to be finished in time despite all the public declarations to the contrary by the European Commission, my government, the German government, which has just assumed the EU presidency, and others - and if (hence: two important “Ifs”) nothing else happens, then this state of affair will lead to the automatic imposition of high tariffs on Namibian agricultural products, making them no longer competitive on its most important export market. And this in turn may then well lead to a serious crisis in the Namibian agricultural sector.

So, given that important deadline of end of 2007 and its possible consequences it is high time for Namibia to come up with a “plan B” for a no-agreement scenario. To come up with that plan B Namibia must investigate all legal, political and other means that could be used to safeguard the precious preferential market access to Europe.

The Meat Board of Namibia has asked Prof. Gerhard Erasmus from TRALAC to prepare an opinion of what legal possibilities are there under international trade law to deal with such a no-agreement scenario. Prof. Erasmus is an eminent expert on international trade law with a PhD from Harvard University in the United States, but he is also born and raised in Namibia, so the Namibian situation, I am sure, is close to his heart.

We are using the opportunity of Prof Erasmus presence in Windhoek here today to raise awareness among stakeholders and the Namibian public at large, about the problems that may arise due to the end-of-2007 deadline, but also and more importantly to open the debate about what Namibia - and mostly its government, I presume - must do in order to prevent the Namibian economy and indeed the Namibian nation from suffering the possible consequences of serious problems in the EPA negotiations, and pull its head out of the noose which the slow negotiation process has put around the neck of the Namibian export agriculture.

With this few remarks I now call upon Prof Erasmus to deliver his presentation after which we will go into a general discussion.

I THANK YOU!