

FTAA Timetable in Doubt After Mini-Ministerial

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A ministerial meeting held in the United States with the purpose of advancing the Free Trade Association of the Americas negotiation process ended without any final agreement confirming several countries doubts about the FTAA timetable.

The gathering with Inter-American Development Bank president Enrique Iglesias acting as moderator convened six South American ministers, two from Central America, three from the Caribbean, and three from North America.

"We had an exhaustive discussion regarding the transition period that countries must face once FTAA is implemented, how to increase competitiveness and productivity, macroeconomic adjustments and infrastructure improvement", said a US source present at the meeting who admitted that "no agreement or resolution was reached". "The most important about the meeting was that it gave us a realistic vision of what can be achieved", said Brazilian Foreign Affairs Minister Celso Amorim.

In the meeting held at the Wye River Plantation in Chesapeake Bay, Maryland, apparently the fourteen participants were split into almost equal number groups, one that believes the 2005 timetable will be reached and those who propose something less ambitious.

United States and Chile figure among the first and Brazil leads the other group, however the US source indicated that all participants confirmed their commitment to the original timetable.

But there was also a feeling that in the coming 34 countries FTAA ministerial summit to be held in November in Miami, an initiative to extend the timetable could also be on the table.

The Miami ministerial gathering will be followed by a last meeting in June 2004 in Brazil, who shares with the United States the presidency of the negotiating table in the crucial last leg of the route map leading to the 2005 target.