‘Window of opportunity’ for stalled Doha round

WTO deputy says G-20 summit can help talks progress

By JESSICA CHEAM

AN UPCOMING meeting of world leaders will create a “window of opportunity” that could see the long-stalled Doha round of trade talks finally concluded.

That is according to World Trade Organisation (WTO) deputy director-general Valentine Rugwabiza, who has been in town this week.

But Ms Rugwabiza told The Straits Times that any breakthrough will require two gaps to be bridged - the differing levels of ambition of countries and the political will to see it through.

The Doha Development Round, which started in 2001, has been stuck for years because of differences between countries, particularly over issues like agricultural subsidies.

But Ms Rugwabiza said yesterday the Group of 20 (G-20) summit in Seoul in November will be a perfect opportunity for leaders to “infuse a momentum” that will help the talks progress in Geneva.

She said members had disagreed on whether the agenda was ambitious enough. “Some would like to see additional market access in specific sectors, and we also need to look at the overall balance of the round.”

Ms Rugwabiza also identified political will as the key to a successful outcome, adding that “the political will is there from all members... so if they manage to close these gaps, clearly there will be a window of opportunity as they’ll have worked on those positions... and give clear instructions to their negotiators”.

She also acknowledged that politicians are responsible for selling the trade pact back home, and that it needed to be a “give and take” situation.

“There is no such thing as a zero sum game in a trade deal; you have to contribute but you have to bring back something,” said Ms Rugwabiza, who was in Singapore for the conclusion of the WTO Regional Trade Policy Course (RTPC), which is jointly organised with the National University of Singapore.

Despite the difficulty of concluding the Doha talks, many critics still believe it would open up new areas of trade liberalisation that would stem the wave of protectionism and benefit both developed and developing economies.

Ms Rugwabiza also commented on the financial crisis, which sent global trade volumes down by 12 per cent last year – the biggest fall in 65 years, she said.

The global multilateral trade system has passed “the stress test”, she added, because countries generally resisted protectionist pressures.

“This is thanks to the resilience of the system and the set of rules that are in place,” she said. But this does not mean countries can be complacent, as “we clearly need to improve on the rules because new challenges are coming up, and even if the system was resilient, some governments could still revert to protectionism”.

Ms Rugwabiza attended the closing ceremony of the RTPC yesterday, which saw 25 participants from 23 countries receive their diploma certification.

The RTPC allows senior officials from developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region to widen their understanding of trade policy matters, the multilateral trading system, international trade law and the functioning of the WTO.