

First session of the Ministerial Council of the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement
Ministerial Declaration

We, the Ministers of the Participating States of the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement, hitherto called the First Agreement on Trade Negotiations Among Developing Member Countries of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (Bangkok Agreement), gather today in Beijing, China, for the first session of the Ministerial Council of the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement.

We reaffirm our commitment to the objectives of this Agreement, notably to promote economic development through a continuous process of trade expansion among the developing member countries of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and to further international cooperation through the adoption of mutually beneficial trade liberalization measures consistent with their respective present and future development and trade needs.

With a population coverage of close to 2.5 billion, and with the participation of some of the fastest growing economies in the world, we wish to highlight the vast potential of the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement as the only region-wide forum for trade expansion and economic cooperation between countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

We note that the international trading system has changed considerably since the Agreement was signed in 1975, and recognize that the establishment of a rules-based multilateral trading system embodied in the World Trade Organization will benefit all countries actively participating in the system. While fully embracing the ideals of global trade liberalization, we also have a vision of region-wide cooperation on trade, investment and related issues, and, aware of the potential of the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement in this respect, invite other countries in the region to join this unique forum, whose coverage we would like to see gradually expanding to include trade facilitation issues and trade in services.

We are pleased to announce that the text of the Agreement has been revised to take into account the global developments that have taken place in recent years. We are happy to note that the third round of negotiations under the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement has been concluded, and announce that the tariff concessions be put in place with effect from 1 July 2006, upon completion of the internal procedures of all Participating States. We direct the Committee to make suitable recommendations including the timing for launching of the fourth round of negotiations for tariff liberalization, and suggest measures of cooperation for further enhancing the trade and investment flows, consistent with our objective of deepening and widening the scope of the Agreement. We commit ourselves to exploring all options for

further trade liberalization between our countries, while accommodating the special concerns of least developed member countries through special and differential treatment.

We express our appreciation to the Standing Committee as well as the ESCAP secretariat, who have worked hard to revitalize the Agreement. We recognize the work that has been undertaken by ESCAP in its role as secretariat to the Agreement since 1975. We also recognize that the breadth and depth of the Agreement will continue to increase in the coming years, and therefore endorse a substantial strengthening of the secretariat.

We have observed that our region is seeing the establishment of several regional trade arrangements, including bilateral trade agreements. We see the spread of these agreements as a positive move towards the liberalization of trade in the region, but would emphasize the need for such agreements to ultimately contribute to promoting trade and investment flows in the region and at the global level as a whole. In order to ensure this outcome, we would like to explore possibilities that might exist for the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement to evolve into a common framework mechanism for all regional trade arrangements in the region.

We express appreciation to the Government of India for its offer to host the Second Session of the Ministerial Council of the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement before the end of 2007.