



Siem Reap, 16 January 2012

Ref: D(2012)55

Press Release

ASEAN officials and business representatives convene to discuss challenges of free trade agreements

Officials and business representatives from the 10 ASEAN Member States came together today (16/1) in Siem Reap, Cambodia to discuss the challenges and opportunities of free trade agreements, as well as ways that ASEAN would benefit from free trade agreements.

Organised by the EU-ASEAN's "Enhancing ASEAN FTA Negotiation Capacity Programme", the event focuses on ASEAN and the European Union (EU) trade policies, as well as on new and emerging trade issues. The event also includes a stakeholders dialogue, designed to enable participants to share their knowledge and experience related to key issues such as the political economy of free trade agreements, the challenges of trade agreement implementation and post-trade agreement adjustment.

Mr Pich Rithi, Director General of Ministry of Commerce of the Kingdom of Cambodia and as ASEAN SEOM Chairman has expressed his deep appreciation to the EU for providing technical assistance on the Enhancing ASEAN FTA Negotiating Capacity Programme to government and private sector representatives of the ASEAN Member States and ASEAN Secretariat officials.

"With a series of 10 workshops all over ASEAN, starting here today in Siem Reap, the EU-ASEAN cooperation will provide a forum for ASEAN trade practitioners and officials to reflect on trade issues, which really matter. We expect a meaningful contribution to enhance mutual understanding on trade matters and the negotiation processes, because trade is such an important affair. Free trade is not only essential for economic development and growth in support of competitiveness, consumer welfare and poverty reduction, it brings together people and ideas. ASEAN and the EU are already keen and important trading partners – the EU being the largest export market for ASEAN. Both regional blocks can only benefit if this partnership prospers further", said Mr Andreas Roettger, Head of Economic and Regional Cooperation of the Delegation of the European Union to ASEAN.

During the event, participants will also engage in negotiation simulation exercises that focus on trade negotiating techniques, methodologies and tools. The four-day

event coincides with Cambodia's hosting of the ASEAN Senior Economic Officials Meeting (SEOM) in Siem Reap on 17-19 January.

The "Enhancing ASEAN FTA Negotiating Capacity Programme" is a € 2.5 million technical cooperation programme funded by the EU for the benefit of ASEAN's Member States. It supports ASEAN economic integration and facilitates ASEAN's preparedness for participating in FTA negotiations. The programme is designed to provide high-quality training, cutting-edge research and analysis, and bilateral FTA negotiations simulations for government and private sector representatives of the ASEAN Member States and ASEAN Secretariat officials. It covers a broad range of trade and investment issues and addresses traditional and non-traditional issues and newer 21st century challenges.

In addition, the "Enhancing ASEAN FTA Negotiating Capacity Programme" will conduct awareness-raising seminars on a wide range of international trade, investment, globalisation and related political economy and socio-economic issues, which will be opened to the public, private and civil society sectors. Issues were chosen to reflect the interests and needs of the ASEAN Member States.

ASEAN as a whole represents the EU's 3rd largest trading partner outside Europe (after the US and China) with more than €175 billion of trade in goods and services in 2010 (according to ASEANstats data). The EU represents ASEAN's largest export partner with exports with more than €90 billion in 2011 and ensuring an annual trade surplus to ASEAN of nearly €25 billion.

EU and ASEAN started regional negotiations in 2007 which were also designed to contribute to ASEAN's process of regional integration. Although these negotiations are currently suspended and the process is following a bilateral track, the EU still believes that a region-to-region free trade agreement between both regions makes political and economic sense in the long term and the strategic objective of concluding an agreement with the ASEAN as a region is retained.

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