

ACP wants regional EPA's, not interim agreements with individual members
By Online Editor
11:22 am GMT+12, 05/08/2010, Vanuatu

By PACNEWS Editor, Makereta Komai in Port Vila

The African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group, which represents 14 Forum Island Countries wants the European Union (EU) to 'slow down' on signing interim Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with member countries.

Instead, the EU should now focus on a comprehensive EPA with all of the ACP's six regions – in line with the agreement's objective to reinforce regional integration.

It's been three years since the expiry of the signing of a comprehensive EPA between the Pacific and the European Union. Only Fiji and Papua New Guinea have broken ranks from the Pacific and agreed to sign interim EPA's.

Dr Mohamed Ibn Chambas, secretary general of the ACP outlined the group's position while speaking to Pacific journalists in Port Vila Tuesday. He is attending the 41st Pacific Islands Forum Leaders summit.

“So far both sides agree that the process has not been satisfactory. In some regions, an interim EPA has been signed separately with individual countries, thereby creating different trading regimes within regions. This defeats the principle objective of reinforcing regional integration, said Dr Chambas.

EPA must now be brought back within a regional perspective to ensure that the ultimate agreement is between regions – the EU and the Pacific and not with individual member countries.

“This is an area that urgently needs to be addressed before it creates problems of division within regions, said the ACP senior executive.

A joint ministerial meeting of the ACP and EU will in October to 'bring coherence to this process.'

“An EPA is based on two clear objectives – that it becomes a development tool and that it reinforces regional integration.

A number of Forum Island Countries, including Vanuatu have expressed their interest for a regional EPA, provided that the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat is able to provide leadership, said Vanuatu's Ambassador to Belgium and the European Union, Roy Mickey Joy.

“I have seen the slow pace of the negotiations coming out from the regional machinery, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. It's mandated to facilitate and spearhead EPA negotiations, said Ambassador Joy.

“Recently the co-ordinator of the Pacific Ambassador’s in Brussels wrote to the Forum Secretariat expressing our concerns that the Forum has not kept the Pacific Ambassadors informed of the developments on the Economic Partnership Agreement or any other European Union related matter.

In 2007, at the Forum Trade Ministers Meeting in Vila, the Pacific Ambassadors in Brussels and London were part of the configuration for EPA, however that has changed, said Ambassador Roy.

“We want to see more involvement of Pacific ambassadors in Brussels who are close to the ACP secretariat on a day to day basis and the EU to be used in supporting and articulating regional interests.

Ambassador Joy said one of the possible reasons is that the same senior officials from the Forum are also leading the process in PACER Plus and subsequently EPA.

“It’s a very tricky question and we hope the meeting in Brussels in October will resolve this issue.”

Pacific ACP leaders on Wednesday were updated on state of play of Economic Partnership Agreement with EU and the way forward for the negotiation.

Pacific ACP Leaders agreed that Pacific countries should continue negotiation as a single region. Countries that have not submitted their market access offers for inclusion in the EPA are encouraged to do so.

A joint technical working group of PACP- EU has been proposed to resolve other outstanding issues.

SOURCE: PACNEWS