

Last obstacles for EPA signing removed

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THE three-year tussle between some southern African countries, including Namibia, and the European Union (EU) to finalise trade negotiations for the economic partnership agreements (EPAs) will be concluded by the end of this year.

“The EU endorsed the request by countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to conclude a full EPA agreement by year-end,” EU Ambassador to Namibia Elisabeth Pape said yesterday.

“There was a meeting in Brussels, Belgium, this week with trade ministers to discuss the proposal for the EPA with SADC and there will be three more such meetings in due course before the signing,” Pape added.

“It will be a full [and final] agreement and not an interim EPA,” she told reporters.

She spoke at the start of a meeting with Prime Minister Nahas Angula and all EU ambassadors resident in Namibia at Europe House yesterday.

The meeting was to discuss the status of the EPA talks, millennium development goals (MDGs), development in Namibia and the third EU-Africa summit in Libya later this year.

The EPAs will allow free access of most Namibian goods to the EU and will replace the Cotonou trade regime which ended in December 2007 and the WTO (World Trade Organisation) waiver.

The interim agreement, which Namibia only initialled, was a transitional measure to keep EU markets open to countries from Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) and to allow negotiations towards complete regional EPAs to continue.

Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Mozambique signed the interim EPA, but Angola, Namibia and South Africa did not. As a result, the interim EPA cannot be implemented.

Namibia has been refusing to sign and insisted that the EU put in writing certain concessions they agreed to during a meeting at Swakopmund.

Namibia’s concerns revolved about food security, infant industry protection, free flow of goods and export taxes.

Until recently the EU has refused to do so, but earlier this month the new EU Trade Commissioner, Karel de Gucht, indicated these issues would be included in the final EPA.

The EU has “no intention to put undue pressure” on Namibia to sign and implement the EPA, De Gucht said in a letter to trade activist Marc Maes, who had petitioned De Gucht on behalf of 15 international non-governmental organisations.

Maes said the group was concerned “over the undue pressure on the Namibian government to sign the interim EPA while negotiations on the SADC EPA are still ongoing and contentious issues still remain outstanding”.

One of the main concerns of Angola, Namibia and South Africa was that the EPA might undermine regional integration.

<http://www.namibian.com.na/news-articles/national/full-story/archive/2010/july/article/last-obstacles-for-epa-signing-removed/>