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Aussie Minister Urges Lower Trade Barriers

Business Day (Johannesburg)

February 8, 2005

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Jonathan Katzenellenbogen
 Johannesburg

AUSTRALIA's Deputy Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Bruce Billson urged developing countries yesterday to make substantial reductions in their trade barriers to encourage economic growth and trade among themselves.

At the launch of an official Australian report on South-South trade at the South African Institute of International Affairs in Johannesburg yesterday, Billson said developing countries should be concerned "about trade barriers wherever they face them, be they in developed or developing countries".

Billson's message is one that would help Australia, as a large commodity producer, gain increased access to markets in developing countries, but it is one that would also could help SA to export more to these markets.

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The current round of world trade talks focuses heavily on increasing the access of developing country agriculture to developed markets.

Developing countries focus their negotiating efforts on gaining access to the developed world, where the bulk of the markets for their commodity exports lie. But Billson said some of the highest tariff barriers for developing-country exports were in other developing countries and there was substantial potential to stimulate trade with trade liberalisation in these regions.

With the trade between developing countries growing twice as fast as overall international trade over the past 10 years, Billson argued that developing countries stood to gain substantial benefits from reducing their own trade barriers.

Developing country tariffs remained well above those of developed country rates, averaging 12,6% against 3,4%. In Africa the average applied tariffs ranged from 5,7% to 5,8% in SA to 30,8% in Djibouti.

The benefits of trade liberalisation in Africa were illustrated by Uganda, where tariff reductions as part of a package of reforms had helped boost exports by an average of more than 10% a year over the decade to 2001.

Billson's visit to SA was a sign of the improving relationship between Pretoria and Canberra after a period of strain over Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth in 2002. Billson met Deputy Foreign Minister Sue

van der Merwe yesterday, and the two agreed to hold regular policy talks.

But there is no indication that SA and Australia are keen to negotiate a free-trade agreement with each other. Their ranges of exports are similar, and while two-way trade has been growing it remains small compared with their trade with the large industrial markets. Trade in the motor industry is one of the fastest-growing areas, with SA exporting BMW 3-series vehicles and importing Toyota Camrys.

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The report from which Billson drew his remarks, *South-South Trade: Winning from Liberalisation*, is part of an effort by the Australian government to reduce trade barriers in developing countries.

Three South African think-tanks - the Trade Law Centre for Southern Africa, the Trade and Industrial Policy Strategies and the South

African Institute of International Affairs - are to receive funding from the Australian government for research projects on trade reform.

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