VIEWPOINT

Views and Points

On 31 July 2004, the WTO's 147 member governments, meeting in Geneva, approved a package of framework and other agreements which Director-General Supachai Panitchpakdi said would greatly enhance members' chances for successfully completing the important Doha negotiations on the removal of global tariffs and trade quotas. This follows the near collapse of the entire initiative after the breakdown of talks held last year in Cancun. Observers suggest that if the situation had prevailed, the WTO would have lost all credibility as a multilateral institution.

The Geneva talks highlighted the increasing influence of the 'developing country' bloc which includes China, Brazil and India. This grouping, it is said, will make it difficult for the richer countries to continue to adopt the 'concession avoidance' policy of past years.

Interested commentators suggested that the outcome of the meeting represents little more than 'pie in the sky' when the twin effects of the forthcoming US Presidential election and the possibility of the adoption of a new constitution for European Union are taken into account. These alone, it is suggested, will guarantee at least a further six months' delay.

A recently released WTO study, based on costs and efficiency, forecasts that India and China are set to significantly increase their shares of the international textile market next year if the Doha agreement is implemented and import restrictions are eliminated. The study revealed that many developing countries would suffer significant losses amid new stiff competition from China and India, which could rule the market after textile import quotas are abolished. In the US clothing market, China's share could surge up to 50 per cent from 16 per cent in 2002, and India's share could move to 15 per cent from four per cent.

Former New Zealand Prime Minister and former WTO chief Mike Moore has said he "never feared a strong China but I fear a weak China" as it could lead to more poverty and economic uncertainties in the world.

Addressing a conference in Malaysia he said: "A strong China and India are healthy and will strengthen the world economy and security order.

"But the United States, for the next 100 years, will remain the world's strongest economy if it keeps its immigration policy open and attracts the best minds. I don't see China overtaking the US.

"I don't think it (China) is a regional monster at all. I think it's a regional consumer. China's imports went up by more than her exports in the last 12 months. She's energy hungry, she's part of the global supply line and China's growth is powering growth in so many areas."

Eleven thousand athletes gathered in Athens for the XXVIII Olympiad, each contributing to the greatest application of performance yarns the world has ever known. A conservative industry estimate indicated that the average take-up was two metres of oil-based synthetics per competitor. Another source suggested that the take-up of elastane yarns could produce enough power to launch a lunar module without the use of rocket fuel.

The oil market is 'twanging like a fiddle string' so that the slightest disruption can send prices rising. Saudi Arabia is said to be the only country with any significant spare capacity, but the ever-present possibility of terrorist action means that a 'twitch' in that direction could send prices to over $65 a barrel. It is also true that Saudi production depends heavily on imported technical expertise – and many of the experts are reluctant to place their skins on the line for any longer than is necessary.

"Maybe the public and markets are being over-paranoid about the effects of higher oil prices," suggests the UK's Financial Times. Given the strength of many economies, the writer points out that the effects of increases are much weaker than is commonly supposed because global growth is so strong.

In July the US job market produced just 32,000 jobs; alarming news for a President seeking a second term. The suggestion is that higher oil prices are to blame for the slowdown – despite the modesty of the increases. Other factors, higher interest rates, a slowdown in the Chinese economy, and a high consumer debt load, have colluded with oil to produce a mere 0.1 per cent rise in US inflation during July.

Scottish-based Cairn Energy is exploiting its fourth major Indian oil find since January. Two years ago it paid just £4m to Shell for 6,000km2 in Rajasthan and has already logged two billion barrels from just 10 per cent of the block.

German engineers and scientists from the Munich Technological University are planning to bring surfing to the centre of Berlin. They hope to create a permanent artificial wave standing seven feet high on the River Spree for the benefit of water sport enthusiasts. The project will be tested on the Bavarian capital's River Isar before being installed in Berlin.

Despite the double negatives of climate and limited locations, surfing is becoming one of the UK's fastest growing sporting activities. Sales of surfing equipment have trebled in the past four years and parts of the south western and the north eastern coastlines are beginning to be considered surfers paradises - with reputations to match.

Two brand names were prepared to slug it out on the poolside starts for the swimming events in Athens. Both claiming to have 'the faster fabrics / designs ever', they spent several millions in research, development and promotion. A third contender was much quieter in its ambitions, but has apparently reaped just as many rewards.

Prophylactic manufacturer Durex gave away 130,000 condoms to the Olympic athletes during the period of the Games. That is allegedly 40,000 more than were made available during the Sydney Olympics.

And finally, the Boyfriend Arm Pillow is described as the perfect bedtime accessory for the single women. Promising to hug its owner all night, it doesn't snore, grunt, or become physically involved in sordid dreams. The specification includes a choice of shirts and an alarm clock that gently shakes the sleeper into wakefulness.