

Developed nations want to expand WTO agenda

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NEW DELHI: In the run-up to the WTO ministerial meeting later this month, developed countries led by the European Union and the US are seeking to expand the issues on the table to include reforms in the basic structure of the global trade body as well as sustainability, micro, small & medium enterprises (MSMEs) and gender issues in what is seen as an attempt to mount pressure on developing countries such as India to make trade-offs. At the same time, they are seeking to defer a decision on public stockholding for foodgrains — crucial for India's procurement programme — by at least two years and have so far not agreed on waiver of intellectual property rights for Covid vaccines and medicines.

“They are seeking to get us to agree on an agreement on fisheries without addressing our concerns over our fisherfolk. This government has

stood its ground at the WTO, G20 and COP26 talks,” said a high-ranking official.

Sources in Geneva as well as some of the trade experts said that EU, along with Brazil, and possibly the US, will push a document on reforms at WTO, which will seek dispute monitoring and a reform to the special and differential treatment along with things like an end to the system of consensus and inclusion of issues that are currently plurilaterals — areas which have been ‘no go’ in the past for India and other developing countries.

Already, India is opposing such moves, arguing that negotiations on issues such as investment facilitation or domestic regulation of services have not been agreed to by all the members of WTO and there is no legal basis for it.

In case of areas such as MSMEs, women empowerment and environment, the proponents such as the EU are not seeking binding commitments from the WTO membership. But the fear is that inclusion of these issues in the WTO declaration will open the doors for them being brought into the framework after a few years.

What is coming as a setback for the developing countries is that the developed countries are blocking any deal on patents waiver to provide vaccines to the poor countries. At the same time, they are pushing for a package on trade and Covid, which

is seen to be an attempt by the developed countries to ensure uninterrupted supplies and secure market access.