

Food is matter of national security for all

By the time you read this you, undoubtedly, will know that the WTO trade talks in Cancun Mexico foundered. Agriculture was one stumbling block. Representatives of the developed countries like the US and the European Union (EU) could not find common ground with developing countries like Brazil, Argentina, Egypt and India (organized as the G-Twenty-Something, Group of 20 to 22 nations) and 70 less developed countries.

The G-20 and the less developed nations wanted the US and the EU to significantly reduce the subsidies they provide for their farmers. For their part the US and the EU as well as some others were demanding that the less developed nations eliminate their tariffs and import controls in exchange for trade liberalization. In the end neither side gave in.

What is interesting to me is that from my perspective both sides were in essence making the same argument. They were arguing that agriculture is different and countries need ways to ensure their own food security.

The less developed countries did not want to open up their agricultural sectors to a flood of food imports that would put many of their small farmers out of business and make them dependent on imported food. Not being able to afford either coupled or decoupled payments, their preferred method of protecting the ability to produce food locally was tariffs and import quotas. For less developed

countries tariffs bring income into the government while payments are expenditures they cannot afford.

While wanting to open up markets for producers, negotiators from developed countries were unwilling to make changes in farm policies without tariff and trade barrier reductions in less developed countries. In the end the strength of the agricultural sector was deemed important.

This behavior is consistent with what I have been saying for a long time. Agriculture is different and nearly all countries view food production as an issue of national security. We can do without a new television or DVD player for months if we have to, but food is needed every day.

No one minds importing bananas, coffee and pomegranates. They are a nice addition to the diet, but not essential. Wheat, rice, corn or cassava is another matter. Most countries want to be sure that, if possible, they have immediate local access to these staples which form the core of their diets. Food security is as important to nations as it is to individuals and families.

Daryll E. Ray holds the Blasingame Chair of Excellence in Agricultural Policy, Institute of Agriculture, University of Tennessee, and is the Director of the UT's Agricultural Policy Analysis Center. (865) 974-7407; Fax: (865) 974-7298; dray@utk.edu; <http://agpolicy.org>.