

French prime minister arrives in Canada for official visit

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Agence France Presses

Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault landed in Ottawa on Wednesday for a four-day visit that includes talks with his Canadian counterpart on quickening [Canada](#)-EU free trade negotiations.

The trans-Atlantic deal, which would give Canadian companies access to 500 million consumers in the EU and eliminate 98 percent of Canadian tariffs on EU goods, has been deadlocked over a few hold-out issues.

Face-to-face meetings last month failed to reach a resolution.

According to diplomatic sources, Paris has paid close attention to the discussions, which could affect its dairy sector as well as pharmaceutical patents and investment protections.

It is hoped that a meeting between Ayrault and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper might help revive the stalled negotiations.

Welcoming Ayrault to the Canadian parliament, Harper said the two leaders were eager to discuss the Canada-EU free trade negotiations "and some of the economic challenges we have," as well as common security concerns.

Ayrault is accompanied in Canada by several ministers as well as by 25 chief executives of French companies such as trains manufacturer Alstom and gas giant Air Liquide.

After Ottawa, Ayrault travels to Toronto, Montreal and

Quebec City where he will meet with provincial premiers.

Canada-EU free trade talks opened in 2009 with expectations of negotiations being concluded by late 2012.

EU trade spokesman John Clancy indicated after the last meeting that agriculture was one of "a number of important gaps to be bridged."

The EU is seeking to lower tariffs of up to 300 percent shielding Canada's supply-managed dairy industry from imports of [European](#) cheeses.

Ottawa is pressing for increased access to EU markets for Canadian beef and pork, which [Ireland](#) opposes.

"On agricultural issues, we are now in a more realistic zone, but we are still not there yet," Clancy said then.

Bilateral Canada-EU trade reached a record Can\$116.4 billion (86.9 billion euro) in 2011, up 10 percent from the previous year, with Canadian exports led by gold, aircraft, diamonds, uranium and iron ore, according to the latest available figures.

Officials said free trade would boost bilateral exchanges by as much as 20 percent.

Ayrault may also press Harper to extend Canada's loan of a military jumbo jet to transport supplies to Mali, where French forces launched a surprise intervention on January 11 in a bid to stop Al Qaeda-linked fighters who had controlled northern Mali since April 2012 from moving southward and threatening the capital Bamako.

Islamist groups have largely been forced out of the main cities in the north and are now waging a guerrilla war against French, Malian and other troops seeking to help the government assert its control over the entire territory.