

Canada launches free trade talks with Europe

BY PETER O'NEIL, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

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PRAGUE -- Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in Prague to announce Wednesday the launch of "historic" and potentially lucrative free trade negotiations with Europe, said he won't let growing hostilities over Canada's seal hunt "contaminate and undermine" broader transatlantic relations.

Mr. Harper said the launch of talks aimed at lowering trade and investment barriers with the 27-nation European Union could bring Canada an additional \$12-billion in economic activity annually.

He and his European counterparts also said the negotiations, expected to conclude in 2011, send a strong signal to the world during the current economic crisis to avoid putting up damaging protectionist walls.

"It is a glimmer of light in the darkness of global recession," Mr. Harper said after the signing ceremony with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and Czech President Mirek Topolanek, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency.

Mr. Harper said Canada strongly objects to the European Parliament's vote Tuesday to ban import of seal products, but said Ottawa won't allow that dispute to disrupt trade negotiations. He said the appropriate forum for disputes is before the World Trade Organization.

"Canada will, both domestically and in front of international tribunals, vigorously defend our sealing industry," Mr. Harper told a news conference. "I do think its important in relationships, particularly relationships as important as the one with the European Union, that the relationship become not about only one issue."

He said Canada and Europe "may never see eye-to-eye" on whether the seal hunt is humane, so letting that issue dominate the relationship would mean Canada "will never have any trading relations" with the EU.

"We cannot let a single disagreement contaminate and undermine all the other issues."

An essay published Wednesday in The New York Times and that paper's global edition, the International Herald Tribune, described the negotiations as a powerful international symbol in favour of free trade and against protectionism.

The authors, former Liberal trade minister Roy MacLaren and former Economist Magazine editor Bill Emmott, noted that demands are growing in the American business community for similar negotiations so that the U.S. isn't left out of the movement to reduce trade barriers.

"It is not only the U.S. that is taking notice of the E.U.-Canada answer to protectionism," they wrote.

"Asian countries will not fail to recognize that with trans-Atlantic liberalization afoot, it is time that they negotiated seriously with the West for fear of losing competitive access to a potentially yet more

massive trans-Atlantic economy."

Mr. Harper made the announcement here at the annual Canada-EU Summit.

The Canadian government also announced the signing of a Canada-EU Agreement on Civil Aviation Safety and the conclusion of negotiations leading to Canada-EU Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement. The latter deal will "lower prices and give more choices for people travelling between Canada and Europe," according to a news release from Mr. Harper's office.

The air transport agreement is intended to provide airlines and shippers with access to more flights and routes, with the increased competition resulting in a "potential for lower fares."

The accord allowing for harmonized safety regimes will "allow the Canadian aviation industry to compete more successfully in the European market, a community of 27 countries, resulting in more opportunities for the trade of civil aviation products and services."

Meanwhile, the statement from Mr. Harper's office made no reference to growing Canada-Europe tensions over the ban on seal products imports.

European politicians say the Canadian seal hunt is inhumane, despite long-standing Canadian arguments that Europe is being manipulated by misleading propaganda from animal rights groups.

Both Canada and Norway have threatened to challenge the law at the World Trade Organization.

The negotiations with the EU, Canada's second-largest trade and investment partner, will include "trade in goods, technical trade barriers, trade facilitation, customs procedures and rules of origin, trade in services, investment, central and sub-central government procurement, food safety and animal and plant health measures, regulatory co-operation, intellectual property, competition policy, dispute settlement and sustainable development," according to a Canadian government news release.

A joint Canada-EU study concluded that Canadian trade would grow by \$12-billion by 2014. Two-way merchandise trade totalled \$90.4-billion last year, a 7% rise over 2007.

Mr. Harper also warned the Czech Republic Wednesday that Canada will be forced to take measures to stem the flow of Czech Roma refugee claimants entering Canada.

Harper said Immigration Minister Jason Kenney plans a visit to the Czech Republic soon to investigate the matter.

"It is a concern, and unless there is improvement the government of Canada will have to take some actions," Harper said here Wednesday.

"It's not necessarily the fault of the Czech Republic, but it is a reality that we do have to deal with."

Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolanek, who leaves office later this week, dismissed claims that the Roma are fleeing persecution even though numerous human rights organizations have said the minority

— once known as Gypsies — are subjected to widespread discrimination and far-right violence.

Instead, he portrayed them as economic migrants trying to take advantage of Canada’s “soft” refugee determination system.

“Canada has a ... very soft asylum procedure,” he said.

“And it’s very easy to get asylum in Canada, and for that reason it is being targeted by individuals who seek economic (gain) rather than any other asylum.”

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