

Harper hails agreement to work toward Canada-EU economic partnership

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QUEBEC - Canada and the European Union are committed to fighting protectionism and to achieving a comprehensive economic partnership, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said Friday.

Tough economic times make it crucial for closer co-operation, Harper said after a meeting with French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Jose Manuel Barroso, the head of the European Commission.

"Among other things, this means rejecting the frequent tendency in difficult times to turn inward and erect barriers between our economies and our citizens," Harper said.

"Indeed, we must stand against protectionism and work to lower and eliminate barriers."

Harper said Canada and the European Union are taking their economic co-operation "to an entirely new level."

"(We) have just completed a comprehensive economic study and have now agreed to define together the formal mandates for negotiating an ambitious, deeper and comprehensive and truly historic economic partnership agreement."

"This will commence as early as possible in the new year."

The prime minister was speaking after a private meeting with Sarkozy and Barroso to discuss the current international economic crisis.

The three men were in Quebec City for the summit of la Francophonie, which was to begin Friday night and continue through Sunday.