

African Trade Ministers Urge End to US Cotton Subsidies

By Catherine Maddux

Washington

26 October 2006

Voice Of America

<http://www.voanews.com/english/2006-10-26-voa1.cfm>

African trade ministers and the President of Burkina Faso are calling on the United States to end generous farm subsidies to allow African cotton farmers to compete on world markets.

The President of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaore, made a plea to restart stalled world trade talks via satellite television to reporters gathered in Washington along with visiting African trade ministers from Benin, Chad, Mali and Burkina Faso.

The president said he is launching an appeal to restart stalled World Trade talks, saying that African cotton farmers cannot wait any longer.

He also reminded the audience that Africa, while only producing seven percent of the world's cotton, is the second largest exporter of cotton after the United States. He noted that some African countries depend heavily on cotton, with 80 percent of their exports coming from cotton.

The president also said it is in the interest of the United States to give African cotton farmers a level playing field. As such, President Compaore, told reporters he believes all U.S. subsidies to cotton farmers should be abolished eventually.

African governments have long complained that generous U.S. and European agricultural subsidies are undercutting African farmers. And now with the World Trade Organization talks stalled, the African ministers say their cotton farmers are suffering.

To underscore their plight Benin's trade minister, Moudjaidou Issifou Soumanou, tried to give reporters a picture of the vastly different financial realities faced by African cotton farmers compared to those in the United States.

He said as a result of U.S. subsidies and artificially low prices on world markets, African cotton farmers lose an estimated \$200 million a year. He compared that number to the \$4 billion the U.S. government gives to American farmers annually. The minister added that in West Africa alone some 15 million people depend on cotton farming to make a living.

His counterpart from Chad, Youssouf Abbassalah, said West Africa economies are being derailed by the stalled WTO talks and heavy U.S. farm subsidies.

The Chadian trade minister said the U.S. must find a way to protect their cotton farmers without hurting African farmers. He called it a moral obligation. The minister also said African trade ministers favor dialogue to resolve the dispute over subsidies. But he warned African officials may be forced to make legal challenges, like Brazil's successful case against Western subsidies in 2004.

The African trade ministers are in Washington to keep the plight of African cotton farmers on the minds of power brokers. They held talks Wednesday with U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador Susan Schwab and US Secretary of Agriculture, Mike Johanns.

In some parts of Africa, cotton is big business. Along with the four West African countries of Benin, Chad, Mali and Burkina Faso, cotton is also a major crop in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania and Mozambique.