

The Government of Zambia has called on COMESA, EAC and SADC to speed up the Tripartite Trade Negotiations if the region is to realise the benefits of regional integration. While officially opening the Fifth Meeting of the Tripartite Committee of Senior Officials held at the Zambezi Sun Hotel in Livingstone, Zambia, the Commerce, Trade and Industry Deputy Minister, Richwell Siamunene said the negotiations are long overdue.

He said the ministers and the heads of state and government are eagerly waiting to see the negotiations come to end - with positive results so that the region can benefit from their collaboration.

“We all recall that when the Heads of States and Government decided on the single Free Trade Area in October 2008, they directed that it should be established expeditiously,” he said.

He added; “Noting the slow progress between 2008 and 2010, and to avert multiple interpretations of the meaning of “expeditiously”, the Heads of State set a clear timeframe within which negotiations for the establishment of the Tripartite FTA were to be conducted. That period was set at 36 months,” Hon. Siamunene said.

He outlined the guidelines for the REC-based negotiations, which include the need to build on the acquis of the three existing trading regimes under COMESA, EAC and SADC, in a bid to speed up the negotiations.

“I have keenly followed the deliberations of the Tripartite Trade Negotiation Forum (TTNF) through the reports of the six meetings it has held so far, and I am disappointed to note the limited progress attained. The first five meetings were devoted to agreeing on procedural and administrative matters relating to rules of procedure, negotiating formats, exchange of trade and tariff information, and interpretation of the negotiating principles adopted by the Tripartite Summit. However, the negotiations must be completed on time as any delay is a perpetuation of the squalor and poverty that the general citizenry continue to wallow in,” he said.

“If this means the TTNF will meet continuously for the next one month, so be it. The bottom line is that Ministers want progress on real issues that affect the poor masses in our countries, and procedural matters and interpretation of guidelines are not among these issues,” he added.

He expressed his hope that after its Sixth Meeting the TTNF will negotiate on the basis of the draft texts of the Tripartite Agreement acknowledged by the Tripartite Summit in June 2011 and that they will complete their work by April 2014 as outlined in their schedule of negotiating sessions.

Speaking at the same function, COMESA Assistant Secretary-General (Programmes), Ambassador Kipyego Cheluget, said that the Tripartite region has potential to make its mark on the world market.

He said that currently the contributions by individual Member States are very insignificant

because their economies are very small compared to other regions like the EU. He, however, said that with the creation of the Tripartite, it will be possible to compete at the world market due to the power in numbers garnered by the individual national populations.

“With a total population of almost 600 million people, and a total GDP of over US \$1 trillion giving an average size of our economies as 23 million people and US \$40 billion per country, as a Tripartite, we are going to offer a larger market to the world,” Ambassador Cheluget said.

He added that in today’s highly competitive world economy, small market sizes are not attractive enough to serious investors hence the decision of the three RECs’ Heads of State and Government that they should create a single Free Trade Area covering the 26 countries in COMESA, EAC and SADC.

“The African Union Commission is also supporting the formation of a continental Free Trade Area to cover the entire continent. This meeting is an inspiration to the African continent and these negotiations will enable the three RECs to remove tariffs that hinder trade, promote investment and build infrastructure that will cater for the entire Tripartite region,” he concluded.