

New delay in discussions to end gaming dispute

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) was informed yesterday that Antigua and Barbuda and the United States had agreed to another deferral of arbitration proceedings, as the two countries seek to finalise a bilateral agreement that would bring years of conflict over the Internet gambling industry to an end.

Minister of Finance and the Economy Dr. Errol Cort yesterday told the Antigua Sun that the parties have agreed to a further extension of their talks to 11 July. He said between now and that time, both sides will continue discussions in the hope of coming to an agreement. Dr. Cort and Ambassador to the WTO John Ashe are leading Antigua and Barbuda's negotiations, while on the US side, Deputy U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador John Veroneau is heading the talks.

"There are still a number of areas that we need to finalise, but in the view of the parties, we are making good progress and we just need some more time to see how we could finalise certain key areas and issues," Dr. Cort said. He told the SUN it was against this backdrop that the agreement to extend the deferral at the WTO was reached.

"The extension, just like the last one, is not an extremely long one because we want to keep parties actively engaged at the table, utilising all efforts to resolve the issues and arrive at an amicable settlement," the finance minister said.

Dr. Cort has repeatedly declined to explain what exactly the sticking points that have prevented a settlement are.

The finance minister said the government is aiming to achieve a final and comprehensive resolution to the gaming issue. "If we can arrive at some amicable settlement, then it would bring

to end all of the proceedings and settle the entire matter... It's a tall order; I don't want to give the impression that it's a simple and straightforward matter," he said.

"I'm talking about a comprehensive settlement in respect of the matter, involving all issues."

The finance minister acknowledged that the process has been a lengthy one, characterised by repeated extensions and delays. He, however, noted that such complex trade issues are often protracted.

"We crave the indulgence of... all stakeholders including the gaming sector and the public of Antigua and Barbuda, as we try to negotiate something that would be in the best interest of all" he said.

Meanwhile, the finance minister said the government has yet to hear of the status of its application to be included on the UK's gaming 'whitelist.' Until Antigua and Barbuda is whitelisted, the online gambling companies registered in this country cannot legally advertise their services in the UK.

Dr. Cort said he broached the issue with British High Commissioner Terrence Knight at a meeting last week, and hopes to hear something further from the UK Government on Antigua and Barbuda's inclusion among approved countries.