

Antigua Attempts Last-Ditch Negotiations in Online Gambling Trade Dispute

By Haley Hintze

The Antigua Sun reported on Wednesday that Antigua & Barbuda's Minister of Finance, Dr. Errol Cort, has returned to the United States for a final round of trade negotiations with Bush administration officials regarding the years-long standoff between the countries over Internet gambling. Cort expressed optimism that his negotiations with United States Trade Relations (USTR) representatives could produce some form of agreement, despite previous meetings that led to no resolution. Cort is also scheduled to meet with US Department of Justice officials during his visit.

The continuing negotiations are in connection with the USD 21 million annual judgment awarded to Antigua & Barbuda by the World Trade Organization in connection with just one facet of online gambling, horseracing. The US has, to date, declined to compensate Antigua despite the WTO decision. According to Cort, the US remains steadfast in its plans to unilaterally withdraw its commitment in that trade sector.

Separately, Cort noted that while „(a)ny country has the right at anytime to withdraw commitment given at the WTO... (t)he US has said it will not allow a free-trade with respect to Internet gaming services.“ Cort noted that WTO rules mandate that a country negotiate compensation with any country adversely affected by such a trade withdrawal, and that „Antigua and Barbuda is the only country with which no agreement has been reached.“

Cort noted that the urgency of the meetings was because of next week's inauguration of Barack Obama as US president, and

if no agreement were reached, a new administration would mean resuming the negotiations virtually from scratch – this despite the fact that an Obama administration might be more receptive to finding a resolution to the matter. „If there is no resolution, then it means that the matter will go over into a new administration under the presidency of (currently President-elect) Barack Obama.“

Cort also revealed that the compensation offered to date in exchange for the United States' withdrawal offered little or no tangible benefits to his country, such as duty-free access on postal and warehouse services. Cort noted that returning to the WTO for more arbitration hearings remained an option in the matter.