

Zimbabwe delays summit on African free trade deal

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The trade minister of Zimbabwe reported on Thursday that Zimbabwe has postponed a summit of Africa's largest trading block COMESA, which had been scheduled to launch a regional customs union in December

Zimbabwe had planned to host the summit in Victoria Falls to discuss boosting trade and improving food security across the region, even though its own economy is in free fall and nearly half its people need emergency UN food aid.

The summit of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) will take place in the first half of 2009, trade minister Obert Mpofu said in the government mouthpiece Herald newspaper.

Mpofu said the delay was to allow more time for the 19 member countries to negotiate the harmonisation of tariffs within the planned customs union, which was agreed at a summit in Kenya last year.

"The consultations ... will go beyond December 6, 2008, which is when the COMESA Customs Union was scheduled to be launched," Mpofu said.

The timing of the summit, already delayed from May, falls at a sensitive political moment for Zimbabwe after disputed presidential elections left the government in limbo.

President Robert Mugabe and opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai signed a power-sharing deal two months ago, but the talks have stalled in a dispute over how to share the most important cabinet posts.

Mugabe this week insisted that he would soon form a government despite objections from Tsvangirai, who has accused the 84-year-old leader of sidelining the opposition even though it holds a majority in parliament.

Zimbabwe originally postponed the COMESA summit in May after Tsvangirai defeated Mugabe in a first round presidential vote, sparking deadly political unrest targeting opposition supporters.

The violence prompted Tsvangirai to pull out of a June run-off.

The summit was expected to finalise steps towards forming the customs union, after the 19 countries agreed to allow free movement of capital goods with a 10 percent tax on intermediate products and a 25 percent tax for finished goods.

COMESA represents around 400 million people, linking Burundi, Comoros, Djibouti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sudan, Swaziland, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

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