

Russia WTO talks 'make progress'

Talks on Russia's proposed membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) have been "making good progress" say those behind the negotiations.

But the chairman of the working party, Ambassador Stefan Johannesson of Iceland, warned that there was "still a lot of work has to be done". His comments came as President George W Bush said the US backed Russian entry. But he said for Russia to make progress the government must "renew a commitment to democracy and the rule of law". His comments come three days before he is due to meet President Vladimir Putin.

Russia has been waiting for a decade to join the WTO and hopes to finally become a member by early 2006. A decision could be reached in December, when the WTO's 148 current members gather for a summit in Hong Kong. That would allow an earliest date for membership of January 2006, if the Hong Kong summit gave its approval. While pinpointing several areas in which there are difficulties in the bilateral and multilateral work with Russia, the US said the meeting was "much more efficient than we've seen for some time". And Australia said it was "one of the best (meetings) we can recall in terms of substance". Mr Johannesson also said progress "on the bilateral market access side is accelerating". Sticking points to membership have included limits on foreign ownership in the telecommunications and life insurance businesses, as well as issues surrounding counterfeiting, piracy, and data protection. Some WTO members also dislike Russia's energy price subsidies, which competitors say give Russian businesses an unfair advantage.