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Suriname

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BRUSSELS, Belgium (Reuters): A group of former European colonies warned on Thursday that a dispute over their sugar exports could set back attempts by Brussels to clinch new trade and investment deals by the end of the year. Sugar-producers from among the nearly 80 members of the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group said the European Commission had failed to show clearly how it would safeguard their benefits under the new deals.

"This may further delay the successful conclusions of the EPA (Economic Partnership Agreements) within the prescribed deadline of Dec. 31, 2007," they said in a statement.

The countries, including Mauritius, Jamaica, Guyana and Fiji, were signatories to a Sugar Protocol dating back to 1975, under which the European Union agreed to import quotas of sugar from some ACP states at fixed prices.

Brussels scrapped the arrangement recently with a view to opening up the EU's sugar market to all ACP countries under the planned new EPA deals.

The Sugar Protocol signatories want the new trade deals to keep a minimum price no lower than under the Sugar Protocol until 2015, and to provide improved access to the EU market.

Talks between Brussels and the six ACP regions have so far failed to yield any agreements.

EU trade chief Peter Mandelson has warned that without a deal by the end of the year, many ACP countries will face higher EU tariffs for their exports.

The EU's existing preferential trade arrangements with the ACP group have been ruled illegal by the World Trade Organisation and a waiver expires on December 31, 2007.

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