

Urgent Notice to Trade & Industry Chambers, Industry / Product Associations

Trade officials of SAARC countries* held a video conference on April 8, 2020, to discuss ways to facilitate inter-regional trade flows under the prevailing circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of the specific issues addressed at the video conference included;

1. provisional clearance of preferential imports on submission of scanned copies / digitally signed certificates of origins (COOs) along with a bank guarantee;
2. provisional clearance of imports at preferential duty subject to retrospective submission of COOs with suitable conditions such as a bank guarantee; and
3. provisional acceptance of scanned copies of documents for release of payments by banks. The above issues were highlighted because of the difficulty of transmitting original documents, either because of the cessation of courier services or the closure of issuing authorities.

At the conclusion, trade officials decided on the following with respect to Certificates of Origin:

1. All countries agreed to provisionally clear imports at preferential duty, subject to the submission of a bank guarantee/undertaking/bond, on the basis of scanned copies of COOs.
2. All countries would facilitate the issuance of retrospective issuance of Certificates of Origin, where applicable
3. Where possible, countries would submit digitally signed certificates of origin, through a digital platform, with the understanding that physical certificates would be submitted later.

On the acceptance of scanned copies of documents for clearance of imports by customs and release of payments by banks, all countries tentatively agreed to accept such copies at this time.

Therefore, you may kindly inform your members of the following, with respect to their shipments to SAARC countries:

1. Department of Commerce is continuing to issue Certificates of Origin during the working hours of 9.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday (except public holidays)
2. Exporters can send scanned copies of the COOs for processing by the Customs of the importing country, which will clear the shipments against a bank guarantee
3. Where exporters are unable to obtain COOs for shipment, consignments may be cleared on a preferential basis against a bank guarantee; COOs can be applied for, and issued, retrospectively
4. For the present, other scanned documents will be accepted by SAARC countries for the clearance of shipments by Customs and payments by banks.

** Please note that Pakistan did not participate in the above meeting, and therefore, was not party to the decisions taken above. However, the Department of Commerce is taking steps to seek similar consensus with respect to Pakistan as well as Sri Lanka's other preferential trading partners, and any developments in this regard will be informed as soon as possible.*