

India trade deal matters more than date: UK trade minister

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

London, 19 October

The free trade agreement (FTA) talks between India and the UK are “progressing well” and a deal that works for both sides is more important than the date when it is signed, Britain's Trade Policy Minister Greg Hands said with reference to the now abandoned Diwali deadline for a draft India-UK FTA.

The minister, who was joined at a Diwali Reception in London on Tuesday by the UK's Chief Negotiator of the FTA Harjinder Kang, said the Department for International Trade (DIT) was committed to build on the Enhanced Trade Partnership between India and the UK.

He said his boss, Trade Secretary Kemi Badenoch, is continuing regular dialogue with Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal to build an “even warmer and more productive relationship” with a focus on quality over speed.

“Talks are progressing well. We have completed five rounds of formal [FTA] negotiations and we are seeing a way forward for a deal that works for both sides,” he said.

“As my boss, the Trade Secretary [Badenoch], likes to say, it's the deal that's more important than the date when it comes to delivering for businesses and consumers in both

our countries,” Hands said.

“Given the importance of the free trade agreement to both our nations, our focus must be on quality, not speed. And by concentrating on the deal and not the date, we'll build an agreement that truly serves all of our citizens,” he said.

The Diwali timeline for a draft FTA had been announced by former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson during his meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi in April.

However, Badenoch – who took charge at DIT under the new Liz Truss government last month – recently confirmed that the negotiators were no longer working towards that timeline “to focus on the quality of the deal rather than the speed of the deal”.

There was much speculation whether UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman's controversial remarks, casting doubts over the expected Indian visa concessions that an FTA would involve, may have derailed the talks.

“Naturally, there is an economic imperative for our countries to work together, which is why we are so eager to secure a trade deal,” Braverman said at the same Diwali reception, in an apparent attempt to distance herself from being blamed for the delay.