

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala poised to become first woman to lead WTO

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The World Trade Organization will hold a meeting to consider a final decision on Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (Photo: Fabrice Coffrini/AFP/Getty Images)

Geneva, February 9 (RHC)-- In Geneva, observers say that the incoming chief of the World Trade Organization has a reputation for shaking up the guardians of wealth and power, which will come in handy in her new role. During Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala's effort to root out corruption during her first stint as Nigeria's finance minister, opponents of her plans nicknamed her "Okonjo Wahala" — "Okonjo the trouble maker."

The 66-year-old development economist embraces the moniker and true to form, trouble was what Okonjo-Iweala withstood campaigning for the WTO job. Finding herself on the wrong side of the Trump administration, her lack of trade-negotiating experience made her the target of a unilateral U.S. veto despite the endorsement of the organization's selection committee and almost all other member nations.

Now, with President Joe Biden's administration's blessing after the only other candidate withdrew, Okonjo-Iweala is poised to become the first woman and the first African to lead the WTO in its 25-year history. She will also be the first American citizen to hold the organization's top job.

"She is this wonderful, soft, very gentle woman with an authentic approach to problems but, boy, under that soft glove there is a hard hand and a strong will behind it," European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde said in an interview. "She is going to rock the place."

The WTO plans to hold a meeting in the coming days where its members will consider a final decision on Okonjo-Iweala's candidacy. If none of the WTO's 164 members oppose her, she will be appointed for a four-year term, with a possible four-year extension in 2025.

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