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APEC TRADE MINISTERS TO DISCUSS LIBERALISATION OF 15 PRODUCT SECTORS

By: Mohd Fisol Jaafar

VANCOUVER, Nov 20 (Bernama) -- Trade ministers of 18 Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) Forum's economies will discuss the Early Voluntary Sectoral Liberalisation (EVSL) of 15 product sectors shortlisted by their senior officials from an initial list of 62 sectors at their meeting beginning tomorrow.

They include a Malaysian suggestion on oil seeds and oil seed products, international trade and industry minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz told Malaysian journalists shortly after her arrival at this Canadian Pacific-coast city of British Columbia. The product sectors were shortlisted by the senior officials after the end of the meeting.

Rafidah said, "Out of the 15 sectors, we want to identify a list as part of a work programme leading to the next year's Apec forum in Kuala Lumpur.

"Some will take longer to study while some may be easier but all told, it is important that we choose a product that has a critical mass for us to agree upon."

Beside oil seeds and oil seed products, other product sectors identified by the senior officials over their two-day meeting are toys, fish and fish products, environmental goods and services, forest products, gems and jewellery, chemicals, telecommunications' mutual recognition agreement, energy, food, rubber, fertiliser, automotive, medical equipment and civil aircraft.

Rafidah said Kuala Lumpur has identified several products, apart from oil seeds and oil seed products, which it may support, but she noted that all the recommendations would need to be studied thoroughly, particularly on how wide and when Malaysia could open up its market for these products.

"Malaysia may or may not subscribe to some of these things, depending on our sensitivity and so would the other countries...that is why studies would have to be done on implications and purposes," she explained.

Other items on agenda of the ministerial meeting include discussions the future of Apec and its direction.

"We would also discuss in general the currency crisis...we would want the leaders to dwell deeper on more important issues like the currency issues," Rafidah said.

All 18 Apec leaders, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, will attend the Leaders' Meeting at the Vancouver Trade and Convention Centre overlooking the scenic Burrard Inlet with the Rocky Mountain range in the background across the waterway on Monday.

Rafidah said the trade ministers would also discuss the proposed inclusions into Apec, of which Kuala Lumpur has been promoting the memberships of Vietnam and Peru.

However, she noted that several others were keen to join Apec, namely India, Pakistan, Macau, Mongolia, Panama, Colombia, Sri Lanka and Ecuador.

She said: "Membership normally must be consensus...Apec should admit countries that have direct relevance to Apec's work programme.

"We will try to make Apec manageable or else it would become another World Trade Organisation (WTO)."

Current Apec members Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong SAR, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and United States.

Rafidah, however, ruled out the possibility of the ministers discussing

the U.S.'s extra-territorial application of its domestic legislation.

"This would not be discussed simply because the U.S. is there but this (the issue) has been discussed in the WTO meetings.

"This is something very contentious...if the U.S. is there in a forum, there is less likelihood the matter would be raised.

"But, certainly the U.S. knows very well the feelings of the Apec members in regard to the extra-territorial applications of domestic legislation," she added.

Rafidah said Apec leaders would discuss reports from the ministerial meeting, including the discussion on EVSL, besides the briefings by the Apec Business Advisory Council (ABAC) which is expected to make numerous recommendations.

She said ABAC members comprise corporate chief executive officers from Apec countries. Malaysia is represented by Malaysia Airlines executive chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli, YTL Corp managing director Tan Sri Francis Yeoh and Sime Darby group chief executive Tan Sri Nik Mohamed Yaacob.

"Their recommendations are very comprehensive, reflecting the diverse interests of the business community in Apec," Rafidah said of ABAC.

In answering a question, Rafidah said there was no overriding issue during the Vancouver Apec meeting, simply because the Pacific Rim co-operation forum has come to a level where there was now better trade liberalisation and investment, liberalisation and trade investment, and economic and technical co-operation.

"That's is why you don't see anything dominant this time like in the previous Apec meetings where liberalisation was dominant," she added.

When asked on the possibility on suggestions for further tariff cuts to make easier for Apec to ride the current volatility in the financial market, Rafidah explained: "People open up their markets for many reasons. For example, Malaysia opens up its economy if it finds its own industries are strong, resilient enough to compete in the market.

"Whether or not we there is a currency problem, there is no reason why we would want to impose tariff protection and also, if there is a nuisance tariff when it would cost more administer than to collect, than we would want to remove it as it serves no purpose." -- BERNAMA

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