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Aye to new trade talks but Malaysia wants acceptable agenda

Ashraf Abdullah in Bandar Seri Begawan

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Thurs. - Malaysia has given a conditional agreement to the launch of a World Trade Organisation multilateral trade negotiations next year but the Prime Minister made it clear it must be preceded by an agenda acceptable to all.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad also said Malaysia had voiced its objections against certain groups of countries holding "sideline" meetings at future WTO talks in a move to set their own agenda and force others to comply.

He said the leaders of the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation were generally of the view that the new round of talks should be held as soon as next year but an agenda must be in place before proceeding with the talks.

"If there is no agenda, we won't have topics to talk about," Dr Mahathir told Malaysian journalists at Istana Darut Taqwa at the end of the two-day Apec summit today.

He said the view that there must be an agenda before launching the talks was shared by many other leaders of the Pacific Rim.

The Prime Minister was asked whether Malaysia had backed down from its earlier position that it would only support the launch of a new WTO trade round if the agenda was already in place.

The joint statement issued at the end of the Apec Ministerial meeting on Monday had said the new WTO round should begin "as soon as possible" but talks to agree on an agenda should begin next year.

However, the Leaders' Declaration at the end of the Apec summit gives the impression that Malaysia has compromised its earlier position by agreeing that the talks should begin next year.

He hoped that all WTO members would be sincere in wanting to ensure an agenda would be in place. "If they deliberately don't want an agenda, it would be difficult to hold a new round. What are we going to talk about?"

Elaborating on Malaysia's objection to the "sideline meetings", Dr Mahathir said such meetings, held by developed countries, took place in Seattle last year.

The "green room" meetings are called by some developed countries to fix their own agendas and to persuade or force other countries to comply.

"As an organisation, the WTO must be orderly, otherwise it cannot be called an organisation. It has to identify the agenda and has to have procedures so that nobody can bypass it and force their opinions on others," Dr Mahathir said.

He said the new WTO round should have an agenda to ensure that it was more focussed.

"Although many countries have free trade agreements among them, we find that some of them face difficulty because the signatories continued to place non-tariff barriers such as anti-dumping rules, quota certification, etc.

"This is as good as having tariffs," he said.

Dr Mahathir said various contentious issues could be included in the agenda in order to reach an agreement.

"If we want to talk about free trade, we must talk about how it is affected by non-tariff barriers.

"If we want to include antidumping, the rules must be standardised and accepted by all. Then the rules will be complied with."

He said countries should not be accused of dumping simply because some of their goods were sold at cheaper prices overseas.

"Well the goods may be cheaper owing to lower production cost.

Normally, export items are cheaper overseas than at home owing to tax levied," he said.

Citing an example, he said the price of a Proton car was more expensive in Malaysia because other countries did not have to pay excise duty, etc."

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