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APEC-NETWORK

MSIA TO PROPOSE VIRTUAL NETWORK OF SKILLS DEVELOPMENT CENTRES AT APEC

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 10 (Bernama) -- In what is clearly its active participation in the APEC process, Malaysia will propose the development of a network of skills development centres for regional economies at the regional forum's upcoming meeting in Brunei.

Announcing this here today, Minister of International Trade and Industry, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, said the virtual network would facilitate the continuous exchange of information on successful skills development models across APEC.

This would be done through shared learning, resource and cost sharing, exchange of programmes and adoption of best practices, she said during a briefing on the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum meeting to be held in the oil-sultanate which begins today with the senior officials meeting (SOM).

After the SOM, the ministers would begin their two-day meeting which would be followed by the APEC Leaders' Summit on Nov 15-16.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is expected to leave next week to attend the Leaders' summit.

Rafidah, who leaves for the ministerial meeting on Sunday, said the Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC) has offered to serve as the coordinator of the virtual network.

It would benefit APEC economies by reducing time and resources needed to develop industry or locality specific programmes to meet rapid changes in training needs as well as enable sourcing of input and resources from both developed and developing members of the region, she said.

Another major unilateral effort undertaken to enhance regional cooperation is its significant strides in dismantling tariffs under Individual Action Plans (IAPs) for 2000 whereby it has either reduced or abolished 541 tariff lines.

These comprise food, paper, footwear, woven fabrics and Information Technology Agreement (ITA).

Besides this, the simple average applied tariff has been reduced to 9.18 percent this year from 9.45 percent last year while the weighted average tariff has been reduced to 2.99 percent from 3.33 percent.

The minister also said that there were also ongoing efforts by Malaysia to align standards on electrical and electronics equipment, food labeling, rubber products and machinery with international standards.

Malaysia has also participated in the arrangement for the exchange of information on standards for toys safety and electrical and electronics equipment.

Rafidah said that Malaysia has also shown progress through its exemption of import duties for raw materials and components for manufacturing companies and components used for recycling and water treatment.

Rafidah said that Malaysia has also participated in the APEC Business Travel Card Scheme (ABTC), together with Australia, Chile, Hong Kong, South Korea, New Zealand and the Philippines.

ABTC, which has been in existence for a few years now, is a scheme to pre-approve multiple entry visas which would simplify travel for businessmen to participating economies.

She said local businessmen are encouraged to apply to the Malaysian Immigration Department for the ABTC.

At the same time, she said Malaysia would contribute to the success of APEC's new website, BizAPEC.com which provides a central link to various APEC information databases which are useful to business.

Businessmen are encouraged to surf the website to obtain information on tariff data base, customs procedures, business opportunities, industry information, and regional export markets of APEC member economies.

Malaysia would also contribute towards improving a business-friendly environment through APEC's work on trade facilitation.

Among APEC's trade facilitation collective actions are to align domestic standards with international standards in four priority sectors -- food, electrical, machinery and rubber products, by 2005, as well as align all electricity and electro magnetic capability standards by 2008.

Others include the adoption of Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) on conformity testing to eliminate the need for separate testing for compliance with product standards in each importing economy.

APEC also seeks to implement the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Customs Valuation Code by end-2000 to ensure consistent and transparent valuation of traded goods.

The forum has also developed an APEC blueprint for Customs Modernisation that maps out APEC strategic direction in the areas of customs as well as a APEC tariff database, directory of professional services, investment guidebook etc, so to enhance access to market information.

Rafidah said that the ministerial meeting would follow-up on instructions given to officials last year to further advance work on trade and investment liberalisation and facilitation and economic and technical cooperation (ECOTECH).

They include improving IAPs to be more business friendly as well as improving Collective Action Plans (CAPs) which include exploring means to reduce non-tariff measures, customs procedures, and facilitation of movement of businessmen.

The APEC meeting would also dwelve into issues on how economies could reap greater benefits from the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and efforts on human resource development and capacity building to address the "digital divide."

There would also be an exchange of views on APEC's contribution to the multilateral trading system and the proliferation of regional trading arrangements (RTAs) and discussions on the impact of higher crude oil prices on APEC economies. -- BERNAMA

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