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NGOs back Dr M's stand on new round of WTO talks

PENANG, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's stand that Malaysia would only agree to a new round of talks under the World Trade Organisation when an agenda is in place is supported by a group of local non-governmental organisations.

Observing the first anniversary of the collapse of the third Ministerial Conference of the WTO in Seattle, 14 NGOS said in a statement:

"The Government rejects a new round of talks in the WTO and wants to work towards the creation of a fair and sustainable international trading system in the interests of Malaysia and other developing nations.

"On this first anniversary of the failed conference in Seattle, we are strongly against this new round and we call on the Government to resist and reject the pressures for such a new round.

"Instead the Government should work together with other developing countries to insist that the WTO concentrate on reviewing and reforming its existing agreements and non-democratic process of decision-making."

The statement was endorsed by groups including the Environmental Protection Society Malaysia, Bar Council Malaysia, Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, Consumers Association of Penang, Sahabat Alam Malaysia and Centre for Peace.

Saying that the future agenda of the WTO should be to resolve problems caused by existing rules, the group felt the time was not right to launch a new round through which the developed countries wanted to inject new issues into the organisation which would further cause disadvantages and problems.

"These new issues will force the Malaysian economy to come under the domination of big foreign firms at the expense of our local economy, jobs and consumer welfare."

The launching of a new round in 2001 with the agenda of the developed nations, they added, would eventually lead to adverse economic, social and environmental consequences for Malaysia and other countries.

Another appeal forwarded to the Government by the group was to join other developing countries in demanding for a reform of the WTO such as:

- * the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights Agreement which should be changed to disallow the patenting of life forms;

- * the Trade Related Investment Measures Agreement should be amended to allow developing countries to use the "local content" policy;

- * the Agriculture Agreement be changed so that Malaysia and other developing countries can protect the livelihood of small farmers, and ensure food security; and,

- * more open, transparent and democratic procedures, including meetings and decision-making processes.

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