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MAHATHIR-WTO
WTO MUST BE FAIR TO ALL, SAYS MAHATHIR

By: E. Sivabalan

SEOUL, Oct 21 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has set the tone for the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Trade Facilitation Conference to be held in Malaysia by saying that the WTO must be "fair to all".

"Generally, we want the WTO to be fair to all sides, not just to listen to one side," the Prime Minister told Malaysian journalists before returning home on the final day of the two-day Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) here.

Dr Mahathir, who was asked on the conference, said the WTO seemed to be concentrating on opening markets, reducing tariffs and other so-called discriminatory conditions.

"But we feel there is a need for weaker countries to preserve their economies because they have certain national needs," he said.

Asked if Malaysia, as host of the conference, would put forward any proposals, Dr Mahathir said it has not been formulated.

Last Thursday, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar told Malaysian journalists here that Kuala Lumpur would host the conference as part of a new round of multilateral trade negotiations aimed at ensuring the interests of developing nations were not left out.

Syed Hamid had said that as far as Malaysia was concerned, its views were that the interest of developing countries should not be left out and extraneous factors were not included for the purpose of any trade negotiations..

The minister however could not say when the conference will be held in Kuala Lumpur.

According to the Asem Chairman's Statement adopted here today, the leaders reiterated the importance of the rules-based multilateral trading system in promoting global growth and prosperity and meeting the challenges of globalisation.

In this context, they affirmed their commitment to work together to seek a consensus to launch at the earliest possible opportunity a new round of multilateral trade negotiations, the agenda of which should be broad-based to reflect an overall balance responding to the interests of all WTO members.

The document said that the leaders agreed that the development needs of developing and least developed countries should be "duly addressed through improved market access opportunities and enhanced capacity-building in the preparation for and conduct of a new round".

They also shared the view that more meaningful and balanced results within a reasonable time frame could be achieved if negotiations were conducted as part of a new round.

Asem is made up of seven Asean countries namely Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The three other Asean member states -- Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are not part of the Asem process yet.

China, Japan and South Korea are the other Asem members from the Asian side while the European members are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom and the European Commission.

Asked on Malaysia's view over the decision to convene an annual Asem Roundtable on Globalisation beginning in Seoul next year, Dr Mahathir said it would allow Malaysia to give its view on the negative aspects of

globalisation.

"We (Malaysia) agree with globalisation but what form it will take, that is the question," he said.

On the question of digital divide which was raised at the Asem summit here, Dr Mahathir said it was a serious problem within countries and between countries of the two region.

"The rich (nations) are more able to acquire skills and knowledge but the poor, because of a lack of hardware as they are costly, will be deprived," he said.

On Malaysia hosting an international-level conference on HIV/Aids as agreed by Asem here, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia viewed the HIV/Aids issue very seriously.

On his bilateral talks with the EC President Romano Prodi here yesterday, Dr Mahathir said Prodi felt that ties between the European Union (EU) and Malaysia should be enhanced.

Apart from opening an EU office in Kuala Lumpur, EU also wanted to be Malaysia's largest trading partner. The EU is currently Malaysia's third largest trading partner.

However, Prodi told Dr Mahathir that the EU could not open an office yet in Malaysia because of "budget problems".

On his meeting with Luxemburg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker here yesterday, Dr Mahathir said Luxemburg wanted to have closer ties with Malaysia in the field of aviation.

He said currently, Luxemburg was having three cargo flights a week to Malaysia but the agreement between the two countries provide for only one cargo flight per week.

"They want to sign a new agreement with us," Dr Mahathir added. --

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