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Malaysia seeks freer trade

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MALAYSIA would continue to seek freer trade which should be fair to the poorer countries, Malaysian Business Council vice-chairman Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam said.

He said Malaysia would constantly bring up this issue in the World Trade Organization (WTO) as it is a vital issue for developing countries.

His views of a freer and fairer trade were echoed by Malaysian Institute of Economic Research executive director Dr Mohamed Ariff who is a firm believer in the virtues of having freer trade.

"I think that the world will be poorer if countries stop trading with one another," Mohamed said.

However, Navaratnam added that trade issues cannot only be seen purely in terms of economics.

"We also have to think of the stability and peace in the world," he added.

Both economists were panelists at the digital video conference on "WTO: Post Doha" with visiting fellow at the Institute for International Economics, Washington, Dr Ellen L. Frost in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Speaking after the video conference, Navaratnam said one cannot pursue efficiency per say from an economic point of view when commenting about Frost's opinion that there are industrialist who want cheaper and more competitive raw materials.

"However, that is not the only issue in life because life is holistic as the saying goes - 'man shall not live by bread alone'.

"There are other things to be taken care of such as equity and fair play," he added.

According to him, unfair trade policies which were imposed by the North on the South led to the onset of the First and Second World Wars.

Navaratnam also cautioned that if the rich and more powerful industrial countries were to prosper at the expense of the poorer countries, terrorism will then gain fertile ground.

"The most oppressed economically and politically will consequently use violence as a last resort to fight the terrible excesses of capitalistic extremism and greed," he added.

Navaratnam summed up Frost as someone who is highly reputed as an intellect, open-minded, emphathetic and professional.

"She would spread the message that we have - free trade, more trade and it should be fair to the poorer countries," he added.

He also said that the courageous call by the British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown to provide an extra US\$50 billion (RM190 billion) annually by 2015, to abolish all forms of human poverty could be the answer to improve the world's human rights problems to be free of poverty and to effectively combat international terrorism.

Brown made this crucial comment at the New York Federal Reserve Bank, last Nov 18.

The funding could come from some form of the International Development Tax that has been proposed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The advantage was that this tax could be shared by all countries according to their agreed capacity to pay.

"This is indeed a great step forward," Navaratnam said.

After six days of intense negotiation in Doha, Qatar, last month, delegates from 142 WTO countries agreed to launch a new round of global

trade liberalisation talks.

President Bush called it a bold declaration of hope that could help revitalise the current slowing global economy.

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