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RAFIDAH-AUDIENCE
WHEN RAFIDAH AZIZ TAKES THE STAGE...

By: Salbiah Said

SINGAPORE, Aug 1 (Bernama) -- They say business and politics do not mix, but when it comes to solving Malaysia-Singapore bilateral issues that are "of concern" to Singaporean businessmen, then it is best to leave the job to a politician.

The politician, a seasoned one at that, is no other than Malaysia's Minister of International Trade and Industry, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz who injected humour into an otherwise typical-business forum.

Speaking at a seminar on "Enhancing Malaysia-Singapore Business Cooperation" at the Singapore Mandarin here today, Rafidah had her audience, mostly from the Singaporean business circle, amused with her candid remarks and repartee when she tackled questions on the "sensitivities" of the two neighbours.

Her advice to Singapore businessmen: "Carry on your business as usual."

"Sensitivities are always there and are expected of neighbouring countries, but both our leaders are mature and wise enough to resolve the issues through negotiations," said Rafidah during a question and answer session.

Earlier, Rafidah said that while there were reports of apparent differences between Malaysia and Singapore at the political level, the fact remained that the Malaysian and Singaporean economies were closely intertwined and both countries had benefited from this close relationship.

"Being close neighbours, there are bound to be differences on various issues from time to time. This however, has not and should not affect the development of the close business collaboration between the private sectors of both countries," she stressed.

"Real businessmen would have factored in all these problems. Only the squirmish ones would be concerned with these sensitivities. Real businessmen should not allow these issues to affect their business decisions."

"Business must go on. My only advice is just don't take sides with politicians," said Rafidah.

Looking ahead, she said both Malaysian and Singapore businessmen should look towards tapping the business potential that the Asean market -- with an estimated 530 million population -- had to offer, especially under the Asean Free Trade Area (AFTA).

A hands-on minister, Rafidah offered to solve some of the problems raised by some members of the Singapore business community at the seminar herself. "Just fax your letter direct to me."

On whether she was going to continue serving the government after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's decision to retire next year, and whether there would be "continuity" at MITI after her departure, Rafidah said she could not predict the future as "god proposes, man disposes", but assured that the system was already in place.

Rafidah said: "Personalities (ministers) come and go. Whoever takes over from me will continue with the pro-business policies of the government. I must give credit to the team that I have in MITI."

On misconceptions that Malaysia was not happy with Singapore's decision to sign bilateral FTAs (Free Trade Arrangements) with countries outside Asean, Rafidah said the question of "unhappy" did not arise.

Singapore, she said was free to have separate FTAs with any country, as long as "it gives the same tariff access" to other Asean members.

Given that Asean was already liberalising the services sector under AFTA, it would only be practical for both Malaysia and Singapore to work towards making AFTA a reality, especially when both countries were looked upon as anchor countries within the region.

On the pegging of the ringgit at RM3.80 to the US dollar, Rafidah said that the government does not see a change in its policy in the near future as it had so far worked in Malaysia's favour.

"Our economy is now back on track and our exports have done well. Since the currency stability, we have registered our 56th month of consecutive trade surplus, which translates to 5.6 months of retained imports on our foreign reserves," said Rafidah, adding that "pegging will continue."

The Malaysian economy, she said was poised for growth. "We are comfortable with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of 3.5 percent this year, led by the growth of the manufacturing and the services sector.

In the first quarter of 2002, real GDP growth was 1.1 percent as against 0.4 percent in 2001. -- BERNAMA

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