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MAHATHIR-CATFISH

PM HIGHLIGHTS AMERICA'S TRADE DOUBLESPEAK ON VIETNAM'S CATFISH EXPORTS

By: Mikhail Raj Abdullah

MBABANE (Swaziland), Aug 13 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has hit out at the doublespeak of the United States on trade liberalisation under globalisation and singled out Vietnamese catfish exports to that market as an example where the superpower made a sharp about-turn.

Addressing participants of the Global 2003 Smart Partnership International Dialogue in his keynote dinner address on Wednesday, he said the US which was keen to normalise ties with its one-time enemy, Vietnam, had heavily promoted the Mekong delta catfish as a golden opportunity for exports.

"Within a few years, half a million Vietnamese were living off the catfish trade, with Vietnam capturing 20 percent of the frozen catfish-fillet market in the US," he said, quoting from the International Herald Tribune (IHT) newspaper.

But the move to encourage Vietnamese catfish exports to the US drove down catfish prices in America and subsequently the Catfish Farmers of America declared war on poor Vietnamese catfish breeders, he said.

In what was surely a 180-degree turn in its trade policies which clearly smacked of protectionism, Washington decided that "of the 2,000 catfish types, only the native American species qualified as "catfish", said Dr Mahathir.

The IHT further said the Vietnamese could only market their catfish in America under the Vietnamese term "basa" or "tra".

Dr Mahathir said as the anti-Vietnamese catfish campaign continued, Arkansas Democrat Representative Marion Berry even suggested that Vietnamese fish were not good enough for American diners as they were contaminated with Agent Orange.

US forces had sprayed Agent Orange all over Vietnam to defoliate all greenery in attempts to flush out the enemy during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s.

As if such absurdities were not enough, Dr Mahathir said that the Catfish Farmers of America ran advertisements depicting fish as "floating around Third World rivers nibbling on who knows what."

He said when Vietnamese catfish were exported to the US in the early days, there was no mention of them being contaminated with Agent Orange as that would have been politically incorrect.

Dr Mahathir said US fish farmers then accused the Vietnamese of dumping catfish at below their production cost and sale price in Vietnam.

He said the anti-Vietnamese catfish campaign continued on relentlessly with the US Commerce Department declaring that Vietnam was a "non-market" economy which meant that its cost of production was suspect.

"And so, Vietnamese catfish farmers numbering almost half a million lost their business, could not go back to ordinary farming, and were destitute," he said.

This, he said, clearly showed America's true intentions of keeping its market closed amid rhetorics of liberalising trade under globalisation.

Dr Mahathir also related the bitter experience of Malaysian palm oil when it was making some headway into the US market in the 1980s.

To protect its soyabean and sunflower seed oil products, the American Soybean Association (ASA) launched a vicious campaign to discredit palm oil, with claims that it was high in cholesterol and caused heart failure.

But he said Malaysia confronted the smear campaign head-on and proved that palm oil was in fact anti-thrombotic as it contained Vitamin E.

The US also accused Malaysian rubber gloves of causing allergies and American hospitals actually put up notices that no natural rubber gloves be used.

Dr Mahathir said the Europeans, firm preachers of open markets, also campaigned against tropical timber and related products, accusing Malaysia of deforesting its forest resources.

Recently they even said Malaysian orang utan habitats were being endangered due to rampant logging. These accusations allowed them to impose all kinds of non-tariff barriers on timber and timber products while rubberwood furniture, which did not even come from natural forests but forest plantations, were said to be poisonous because of boric acid preservatives.

But the real reason for such campaigns was to protect the market share of temperate timber, Dr Mahathir said.

"This is globalisation as interpreted by the rich ethnic European countries. They say they will open their markets to us, but they find all kinds of excuses to keep them closed," he said.

He said their market opening measures were almost often conditional.

"You have to support their policies or it will be cut off. And at the slightest misdemeanour, sanctions will be applied," he said.

Dr Mahathir said despite formulating well home-grown policies that offered some protection to domestic industries, "we are told that we must open up completely, subject ourselves to rules which are formulated by rich people elsewhere and have our government abdicate its role as the formulator of policies and their enforcement." -- BERNAMA

MR FR SHY