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RAFIDAH-WTO

RAFIDAH TO LEAD DELEGATION TO INFORMAL MINISTERIAL MEETING ON WTO ISSUES

By: Mohd Kamel Othman

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 11 (Bernama) -- International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz will lead the Malaysian delegation to the Informal Ministerial Meeting on World Trade Organisation (WTO) issues in Tokyo beginning Friday.

The meeting is to enable ministers to exchange views on the progress of WTO negotiations on market access for agriculture, non-agricultural products and services and the development of other issues such as anti-dumping, WTO rules and Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS).

The ministers will also review discussions on the new issues of trade and investment, trade and competition policy, trade facilitation and transparency in government procurement.

The three-day meeting will be attended by 25 WTO members. They are Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Costa Rica, Egypt, European Commission (EC), Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, South Korea, Lesotho, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nigeria, Senegal, Singapore, South Africa, Switzerland, Trinidad & Tobago and the U.S.

"We will continue talking. We have so many outstanding issues," Rafidah told Bernama.

Progress in current WTO negotiations particularly on substantive issues have been slow and uneven reflecting diverging interests between developed and developing countries.

Deadlines on two areas of negotiations namely TRIPS and Health and Special and Differential Treatment have passed without having achieved an agreed outcome.

The Tokyo meeting will enable ministers to discuss ways to provide impetus to bridging difference on issues where positions among members are still far apart, as well as to review the progress of discussions in other areas such as market access for agriculture and non-agriculture products and services.

During the WTO Ministerial Conference in Doha in 2001, the ministers have agreed that members would embark on a work programme limited to clarifying and identifying elements for inclusion in a possible multilateral framework on rules for the four issues.

The decision on negotiations will be taken at the 5th Ministerial Conference in Cancun, Mexico in September 2003.

"I do not see any new developments happening in Tokyo. Perhaps there might be better understanding but we have missed so many deadlines of the WTO in terms of negotiating issues," Rafidah said.

"I am not sure whether this (meeting) will contribute very much to the Cancun Meeting," she added.

However, the minister said that Malaysia is going for two reasons that is to know the thinking of the major players and to strengthen its position on some of the issues.

Apart from attending the informal ministerial meeting, Rafidah will have a bilateral meeting with Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Takeo Hiranuma.

The meeting, scheduled on Sunday, is to discuss further economic cooperation between Malaysia and Japan.

"We will discuss on the Close Economic Partnership (CEP) framework which will include the free trade area with Japan," she said.

The Malaysia-Japan bilateral free trade area was announced in December 2002 during Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Japan.

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