

FTA: Cabinet to finalise stance on Wednesday
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Malaysia will finalise this week its stance on 58 outstanding issues that bogged down free trade talks with the United States last month, the trade minister said today.

Rafidah Aziz was quoted by the official Bernama news agency as saying a final decision will be made at the cabinet's weekly meeting this Wednesday.

She asked various ministries to review the issues after talks became deadlocked in February. She said the ministries will present their respective reports to cabinet.

"Each ministry would provide their specific stand on the matter and this would be discussed by the cabinet. The conclusion drawn would be Malaysia's stand when discussing the issue during negotiations," Rafidah said.

The two countries have held five rounds of talks for a free trade agreement (FTA), but negotiations have bogged down over the 58 unresolved issues and no further rounds have been scheduled.

'No-go' issues

Rafidah has said sensitive or "no-go" issues, including Malaysia's positive discrimination policies for its majority ethnic Malays, would be excluded from the next round of negotiations.

She has not elaborated on the nature of the 58 contentious issues except to say they involved the ministries of trade, agriculture, labour, science and technology, finance and environment.

On Monday she said the cabinet will also consider any other options that Malaysia can take. She did not elaborate.

Washington must conclude the FTA by the end of March to give the US Congress the requisite time of three months to consider the deal.

The FTA must be passed before July 1, when US President George W. Bush loses his Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) which allows deals to be fast-tracked.

Washington fears a Democrat-controlled congress will not renew the authority.

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