

Ministers yet to agree on FTA with US
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The Malaysian government continues to discuss key issues in a free trade agreement (FTA) with its top trading partner the United States.

"The government fully understands the thinking and concerns of the people on the matter," Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was quoted as saying by the New Straits Times newspaper.

"I would like to assure that the nation's interest will always be safeguarded and would not be sacrificed in any way," he said.

Abdullah, speaking after a cabinet meeting Wednesday failed to settle the debate, said ministers would meet again next week to continue the discussions.

Malaysian farmers, activists and opposition parties have demanded a halt to negotiations on an FTA with the United States which they say will damage livelihoods.

Malaysia is the 10th largest trading partner of the United States and the FTA needs to be settled by the end of March to give the US Congress the requisite time of three months to consider the deal.

The timetable is tight because US President George W Bush loses his Trade Promotion Authority (TPA), which allows deals to be fast-tracked, on July 1 and there are doubts that the now Democrat-controlled Congress will renew the provision.

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