

Malaysia still hopeful on trade deal with US
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Malaysia has expressed hope it would still forge a free trade agreement with the United States as the two countries missed an end-of-month deadline to fast-track the deal.

Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said there was still room to negotiate on the deal which was bogged down partly over Malaysia's affirmative action policies for its ethnic Malays.

However he said the country's interests would not be sacrificed.

"The US will have their templates. We also have our parameters on which we can agree or we cannot agree, but it does not mean that we would stop the negotiation if there is any advantages going to accrue to us," said Syed Hamid.

"There's a lot of public interest and the bottomline is to ensure that our national interest is at all times protected," he told reporters.

The United States last week ruled out securing a free trade agreement (FTA) with Malaysia before President George W Bush loses his trade promotion authority to "fast-track" a deal on July 1.

The expiry date gave US negotiators up to March 31 to present a deal for a mandatory 90-day review by the US Congress. Any agreement secured after the March 31 deadline will make congressional approval a complex exercise.

No date set for further talks

"It is up to the parties leading the negotiations to carry on with it. I don't think we should look at it as ... the end game. It's not," Syed Hamid said.

The two nations last held a round of FTA talks in February, but failed to set a date for further talks after negotiations bogged down.

Malaysia maintains positive discrimination policies that provide special privileges to indigenous and ethnic Malay-owned firms, a sore point for US negotiators.

Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak said Thursday that talks with the United State "will be held fairly soon" after the government reached negotiating positions on its policies.

A spokesman for the US Trade Representative last week said a Malaysian team is scheduled to come to the United States in mid-April for consultations.

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