

**Activists celebrate as FTA deadline expires**  
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Malaysian opponents of a free-trade deal with the United States celebrated on Saturday after the countries missed an end-of-the-month deadline to fast-track an agreement.

Malaysian farmers, activists and opposition parties have been demanding a halt to the talks on a free-trade agreement (FTA), which they say will damage livelihoods.

"We are happy, Malaysia did not meet the deadline," said Y Kohila, a coordinator with the group People's Coalition Against FTA.

"We will continue to oppose the FTA. Definitely, the anti-FTA demonstrations has forced Malaysia to miss the deadline. It is a victory for now," she added.

The United States has ruled out securing a free trade agreement (FTA) with Malaysia before President George W Bush loses his authority to "fast-track" trade deals 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.

Former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad warned in March that a trade deal with the United States may harm the economy and constrain government policy.

"I worry the FTA with the US may have an adverse effect on us," he said.

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

### **The sticking point**

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

Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak said on 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.

S Arutchelvan, spokesman with the rights group Suaram said if the FTA deal was sealed, Malaysian workers and farmers could lose their livelihood.

"Inflow of cheap goods will cause Malaysian companies to close shop. Workers may lose their jobs," he said.

"The failure of the FTA talks is a success for us. We continue to spread the anti-FTA message," he added.

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