

M'sia to dispatch officials to Washington, initiate tariff talks – Anwar

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Asean nations have reached a consensus on sending officials to the US for engagement sessions on the slew of recently imposed tariffs.

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said the move to initiate discussions is part of Malaysia's alignment with the "soft diplomacy of quiet engagement" as opposed to "megaphone diplomacy".

"Together with our colleagues in Asean, we will be dispatching our officials to Washington to begin the process of dialogue," he said during his keynote address at the Asean Investment Conference today.

"There may be limited room to revisit the underlying intent (behind the tariffs), but there is still scope for adjusting the policy's implementation," he added.

Anwar also remarked that US President Donald Trump's tariffs are far from the first or last challenge to multilateralism.

"But, if Asean can hold its nerve - staying open, pragmatic and cohesive - it may yet be among the last believers in a world that works better when it works together," he emphasised.

Insisting that Asean remains broadly committed to openness, cooperation and institutional continuity, Anwar said the bloc must rely more on itself by strengthening trade within member nations.

"(Asean's) total trade in goods stands at US\$3.5 trillion (RM15.6 trillion), but this figure is not guaranteed.

"With the barrage of tariffs sweeping across the world in fast and furious fashion, we are witnessing the fraying of the global order.

"We must move beyond rhetoric to execution. Tariff liberalisation within the region is largely complete, but regulatory alignment, cross-border logistics and digital connectivity remain unfinished business," he added.

Asean's strength 'not in drama'

Anwar also said that while the situation presents a temptation to retreat into nostalgia or fatalism, Asean's strength "lies not in drama, but in durability".

"Asean has always been a creature of evolution, not revolution.

"Over nearly six decades, it has withstood war, crises and coups (yet) still managed to inch forward, often frustratingly, but forward nonetheless," he added.

He also stressed that Malaysia's trade with the US has long been a model of mutual gain, with Malaysia's exports supporting local growth while stimulating the creation of high-quality jobs across the US.

Anwar cautioned that while such a commercial relationship had served both countries well thus far, Trump's tariffs may end up "harming all".

Trump's tariffs

Last week, Trump revealed sweeping new reciprocal tariffs on several of Washington's Southeast Asian trading partners, including Malaysia, which was hit with a 24 percent tariff.

Cambodia was slapped with a whopping 49 percent tariff, the highest among Asean nations, followed by Laos (48 percent), Vietnam (46 percent) and Myanmar (44 percent).

While Brunei is also looking at a 24 percent tariff, Indonesia's exported goods to the US could see a 32 percent tariff. A 17 percent and 10 percent tariff were also imposed on the Philippines and Singapore, respectively.

The tariffs are expected to come into effect tomorrow, following the implementation of a baseline 10 percent tariff on April 5.

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