

## **Malaysia pressured to ease up on GM food regulations**

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The government has been urged not to bend to US pressure to scrap its proposed laws that would bring in mandatory labeling of genetically-modified (GM) foods.

Groups lobbying against the US-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) said this amounts to meddling and provides yet another reason for the government not to proceed with the negotiations.

The labeling proposal is one of the provisions of the Biosafety Bill that has already been approved by the cabinet but has yet to be tabled in Parliament. The bill governs the production and sale of GM organisms and their by-products.

At a press conference in Kuala Lumpur by the People's Coalition Against US-Malaysia FTA this morning, Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) legal advisor Jessica Binwani criticised two US industry groups for trying to influence their government into removing the labeling provision.

She was referring to the American-Malaysian Chamber of Commerce (Amcham) and the Washington-based Biotechnology Industry Organisation (BIO) which had submitted position papers to the US Trade Representative (USTR).

Citing the papers, Binwani said the groups had described the labeling requirement as "having the potential to mislead consumers" regarding the safety of GM foods "by implying biotech foods are either different from conventional foods or present a potential risk".

The papers also complained about the cost of complying with labeling and traceability rules such as requiring farmers to segregate seed, crops, and feed and to use complex record keeping systems would raise prices.

Therefore, the USTR was urged to be "firmly opposed" to the proposed law as it would "disrupt US agricultural exports to Malaysia and make them less competitive".

### **Take a step back**

Binwani said such comments and pressures on Malaysia's right to legislate against the potentially negative impacts of GM foods "are highly inappropriate".

"As consumers, we are entitled to know what is in our food, and if it comes from a GM source, we are entitled to know so," she said.

"We urge the Malaysian government to take a step back and look exactly at where they are being pushed, to look at their commitments, to halt the negotiations until these contentious issues have been resolved," she added.

Coalition Against Healthcare Privatisation (CAHP) representative AH Ponniah warned of deteriorating health standards and rising costs of medicines that would occur as a result of the higher intellectual property provisions proposed in the FTA.

He also compared the FTA negotiations between the US and Malaysia, which groups have criticised as lacking transparency, as an arranged marriage between two unknowing partners.

"They're talking of a marriage without the two parties knowing what the marriage is all about," he said.

Monitoring Sustainability of Globalisation director Charles Santiago questioned the need for the FTA given the trade that has already existed between US and Malaysia.

Rather than benefitting Malaysia, the experience of Singaporean companies who earned lower revenues following the republic's signing of an FTA with the US suggest Malaysia may also find a larger trade deficit following an FTA with the US, he said.

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