

Rafidah says no hurry for US free trade deal
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Malaysia is in no hurry to forge a free trade deal with the United States, trade minister Rafidah Aziz said today after the countries missed a deadline to fast-track the agreement.

Rafidah said she had spoken to United States Trade Representative Susan Schwab about the agreement, which will now face a complex process in the US Congress in order to be passed.

"Susan Schwab and I have agreed that we will take our time," Rafidah was quoted as saying by the state Bernama news agency during a visit to the United States to promote trade.

"We want to discuss it properly and we should not be concerned by any deadline," she said.

Washington had been racing to conclude the agreement before President George W. Bush loses his Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) to "fast-track" trade deals at the end of June.

The expiry date gave US negotiators up to March 31 to present a deal for a mandatory 90-day review by the US Congress.

Mindful of the deadline, the United States rushed through a deal with South Korea on April 2.

Talks bogged down

Bush has urged lawmakers to renew his authority but is likely to face problems now the Democrats control Congress.

"If they get the TPA, fine. If they don't get it, at least we have the advantage of discussing it until the TPA is obtained. We don't stop negotiating," Rafidah said.

Negotiations are scheduled to resume on Friday in Washington after a fifth round of talks were bogged down in February over a series of issues, including Malaysia's affirmative action policies for its majority ethnic Malays.

The decades-old policies provide special privileges to indigenous and ethnic Malay-owned firms, a sticking point for US negotiators.

Despite the resumption of talks, Malaysia has said it will not sacrifice its national interests in order to forge a deal with the United States.

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