

**FTA talks: EU to press M'sia on rights, press freedom**  
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European Union lawmakers said today they will press Malaysia on human rights, press freedom and standards of justice during talks on a free-trade deal expected to be struck in 2012.

"Human rights will play a role in the Malaysia-European Union free-trade talks," said German lawmaker Werner Langen, chairman of an eight-member European Union delegation visiting Malaysia.

The lawmakers met opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, who is on trial on sodomy charges which he says are a political conspiracy aimed at destroying his career.

"The European Union will continue to observe the case. We will be observing it closely (to see) if there is any indication the pursuit of the case does not meet international standards," Langen told reporters.

Anwar, a former deputy premier who was sacked and jailed on separate sex and corruption counts a decade ago, says he is again the victim of a political conspiracy and fears he will not receive justice on the latest allegations.

Foreign Minister Anifah Aman today pledged a fair trial for Anwar, after talks with visiting US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who renewed US calls for the charges to be handled "fairly and transparently".

Judicial independence

Another EU delegation member, Belgium's Ivo Belet, said they were also concerned about judicial standards and press freedom in Malaysia, where the mainstream media is controlled by the government.

"We have expressed some concerns related to the freedom of the press and the judiciary," he said. "We are concerned about the evolution here."

Malaysia and the European Union kicked off free trade talks last month, hoping to boost a relationship that currently accounts for around 10 percent of Malaysian imports and exports.

Malaysia-based EU ambassador Vincent Pilet said the first round of talks will be held Dec 6-9 in Brussels and the deal is expected to take two years to conclude.

"We expect the free trade to kick off in 2012," he said.

Prime Minister Najib Razak and European Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso jointly announced the formal commencement of the talks in October.

The deal will focus on market access for goods and services, investment, trade facilitation and economic cooperation.

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