

Nation's interests will be safeguarded, says PM

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KUALA LUMPUR: Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the government would always safeguard the nation's interests in its negotiations on a free trade agreement with the United States.

Bernama quoted the prime minister as saying that the matter was discussed at length and in detail by the Cabinet yesterday and would again be discussed at next week's meeting.

"The government fully understands the thinking and concerns of the people in this matter.

"I would like to assure that the nation's interests will always be safeguarded and would not be sacrificed in any way," he said.

Some quarters had expressed concerns that the FTA would only benefit the Americans.

The two countries have held various rounds of negotiations in the last year, with the latest in Kota Kinabalu last month.

Malaysia feels there should be no time-frame for the conclusion of the FTA negotiations while the US wants an agreement before the expiry in June of President



Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi says the government understands concerns of people

George W. Bush's "fast-track authority", which compels the US Congress to accept or reject it in toto.

Meanwhile, it is learnt that the views of all ministries on the impact of the FTA were gathered at

the meeting.

Asked on the outcome, one minister said it was decided that another set of discussions would be held soon.

After five rounds of inconclusive negotiations, and with the US deadline looming large, ministers were asked last month to give their opinions on the 58 contentious issues said to be holding back an agreement.

Among them are questions about intellectual property rights and certain government policies, including procurement.

Human Resources Minister Datuk Seri Dr Fong Chan Onn said the Cabinet meeting yesterday took longer than usual due to lengthy discussions on the FTA.

He said he had presented his ministry's stand on labour-related issues. "I cannot divulge the details. Whatever is decided by the Cabinet is a collective position. We act as a team," he said.

Fong said through the FTA, Malaysia would also seek to further increase trade and investments in both directions, create

higher-paying jobs and enhance competitiveness.

Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said: "We are still discussing and nothing has been finalised yet. So just wait for the announcement. We have decided not to make conflicting statements," he said.

The March deadline was imposed by the Americans who have to present it to Congress 90 days before the current Trade Promotion Authority to negotiate FTAs lapses.

The Ministry of International Trade and Industry, the co-ordinator of the negotiations, has taken the lead in most of the issues discussed, ranging from market access, trade remedies, rules of origin, investment, services and capacity-building.

The US is Malaysia's largest investor with more than RM104 billion in cumulative investments in the country. It is also Malaysia's single largest trading partner, while Malaysia is the US' 10th largest.