

# Liberalisation of legal sector to improve economy

NST- 10/3/2007

**BANGKOK:** The Malaysian Bar is considering further liberalising the legal sector where foreign players are currently limited to Labuan.

International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said the move was necessary in view of the increased economic activity in mergers and acquisitions, where international legal expertise was sought.

Rafidah said Malaysia has made market access commitments in the World Trade Organisation for a number of service sectors, adding that revised offers were tabled in December 2005 and current domestic consultations were on-going to further improve the country's offers.

On legal services, she said Malaysia's existing offer under the Doha Round allowed for foreign lawyers to establish a limited liability partnership registered in Labuan where they could provide legal advice on national and international law to offshore corporations registered there.

In this increasingly globalised environment, Malaysian and other Asean service providers should seek out strategic partnerships to further increase their competitiveness by exporting services abroad



**Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz says strategic international partnerships must be formed**

and tapping the global legal services market worth US\$20 billion (RM68 billion) annually.

"Therefore, the setting up of joint ventures such as Zaid Ibrahim & Co is indeed timely," she said when officiating the opening of the law firm's third overseas office in Bangkok.

Also present were Malaysian ambassador to Thailand, Datuk Shaarani Ibrahim and the firm's senior partner and chairman of the Partnership Council, Datuk Mohd Zaid Ibrahim.

Rafidah said such partnerships

would further increase competitiveness in exporting services as the legal services sector had shown continuous growth in international trade, largely due to the emergence of new fields of practice such as privatisation, cross-border mergers and acquisitions.

She said the launch of Zaid Ibrahim & Co in Bangkok reflected not only the firm's desire to expand into the Asean market, but also the government's objective of encouraging synergistic collaborations between companies and entrepreneurs in Asean.

"Undoubtedly, Asean business entities have developed their own respective expertise in particular areas, whether in manufacturing or in the services sectors. However, some areas are still lacking in expertise and experience."

Rafidah said Malaysian companies should also take advantage of Thailand's openness in the legal sector by venturing into the kingdom.

The firm, which received a Brand Promotion Grant from the Malaysian External Trade Development Corporation in 2005, opened its first overseas office in Singapore in 2003 and in Jakarta two years later. — Bernama