

Consumers have no confidence in GST complaint channel

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As the implementation of the goods and services tax (GST) approaches, voices of discontent have already begun flooding media channels, social media and coffee-shop talk.

A major source of frustration has been the lack of clarity on the actual impact of the 6% tax on the cost of a wide array of items and services, amid reports of complaints from small business owners who are closing shop, citing increased costs and uncertainty on how to run their businesses once the tax kicks in on April 1.

Those opposing the GST implementation have also argued that the new tax scheme and the general confusion surrounding it will give room to errant traders to raise prices indiscriminately.

These frustrations were on a boil at a protest organised by Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) yesterday outside the Customs Department office in Kelana Jaya, Petaling Jaya.

Scuffles erupted between demonstrators and police and the day-long protest was capped with the arrest of more than 80 people.

PSM secretary-general S. Arutchelvan said the group was demanding that Customs officers explain how consumers and the public would be protected against unscrupulous raising of prices, and were renewing calls for the GST to be postponed.

The demonstrators had submitted 106 questions to the department and had prepared to wait for the answers until police broke up the demonstration at 5pm yesterday.

The government has repeatedly tried to assure Malaysians that all steps will be taken to ensure that unscrupulous business owners do not raise prices unreasonably.

Errant traders caught unlawfully raising their prices face up to RM50,000 fine or five years' jail and the government has set up an online GST-related complaint channel where the public can raise up their concerns.

However, the main contention of GST opposers is the lack of action against unscrupulous traders.

"The supposed penalties and complaint channels are no assurances, because we question how efficient will the Customs officers be in actually responding to our complaints and conducting checks on businesses," said market analyst Sam Wong.

The Malaysian Insider decided to lodge a complaint on the GST site against a particular institution of education seeking to raise its fees after April 1. We hoped to

ascertain just how easy or difficult the process was, and to evaluate the speed in which our complaint was attended to.

The following screenshots illustrate the process.

Step 1:

We entered the official GST site to lodge our complaint at gst.customs.gov.my. The site loaded rather quickly, and we hope that when traffic to the site experiences a sharp increase (which it surely will after April 1), the server will continue to be as reliable.

Step 2:

Click on "Consumers" and you can choose to either review a list of sundry goods that should not be affected by the GST, or you can choose to immediately lodge a complaint.

Step 3:

After choosing to file a complaint, we were led to a page where consumers can fill up details of their grouses. Again, we are happy to report that until this stage, the pages loaded quickly.

After filling out the relevant details, we were given a reference number to allow us to check on the status of our complaint.

The blank spot in the section under "Tindakan" is meant to be filled up by the relevant officers after our complaint has been received.

Our report was submitted on Wednesday, March 18, and when we checked last night (March 23), there was still no action taken on the report.

Calls to the GST department repeatedly for three days were to no avail, and all our calls were left unanswered. This left us with little choice but to just wait and hope that our complaint would be seriously looked into.

That prices of goods and services will be raised after April 1 is a given, and it is safe to say that many businesses will be doing so indiscriminately, regardless of whether they are affected by the GST.

The question that begs answering now is, do all Malaysians need to camp out in front of the Customs Department like yesterday's protesters before our voices are heard. – March 24, 2015.

<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/consumer-confidence-in-gst-complaint-channels-sorely-lacking>