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## Rafidah takes on new role

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 7 — Known as the "Iron Lady" for her no-nonsense approach in tackling multilateral trade negotiations, former International Trade and Industry (MITI) Minister Tan Sri Rafidah Aziz has still the drive and passion to take on global trade issues.

At 66, Rafidah has not called it quits, especially when it comes to playing the role of a Malaysian "ambassador" in dealing with issues close to her heart.

She is now the patron and advisor of the Malaysia-Europe Forum (MEF), launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak on Nov 12.

Her new position in the MEF will see Rafidah playing an active role in fostering greater understanding between Malaysia and the European Union (EU).

Rafidah, the MP for Kuala Kangsar, had been the longest serving Minister of Trade and Industry, holding the position from 1987 to 2008.

She knows her trade like few others and Rafidah's knowledge of complex rules on international trade is remarkable.

Unlike her aggressive stance at tough trade negotiations during her tenure as MITI minister, the current approach would be in synch with the MEF's motto, "Building Bridges Through Dialogue", when undertaking various events both in Europe and in Malaysia.

The brainchild of Millicent Danker, who is also a member of its board of trustees, the MEF was mooted to promote international confidence in Malaysia, and intends to shed clarity on Malaysia's economic and social policies to support worthy causes that benefit the country.

"When we attend roundtable forums in Europe, we can explain issues raised on Malaysia. We can also help by providing feedback to the government," Rafidah told Bernama recently.

"We are entering big markets like the EU, which sets very high standards for products and services. It is important for our companies to fully subscribe to these standards, failing which there will be a ban on our products," she said.

The MEF serves as a vehicle to organise high-level forums, dialogues and networking sessions, in both Europe and Malaysia.

Among its key objectives are to ensure Malaysia has continued access to the expanding EU market; support and complement the government's efforts to facilitate inbound business, trade and investment; enhance Malaysia's international reputation; and expand Malaysia's economic outreach in Europe.

"It was set up by a group of Malaysians and Europeans who believe there is value in forging strong relationships between Malaysia and Europe, outside of the government sphere," said Rafidah.

She said events were being planned for 2010, and include a series of roundtables in London and the EU capitals.

So far, several events have been organised successfully in London and Brussels. These include the Annual Emerging Markets Summit inaugurated in August 2008 in London and the Spring Roundtable Series, launched in Brussels in April this year.

Malaysia and the EU have a continuing dialogue which focuses on a number of issues, including, trade agreements, sustainable business, the green agenda, governance and transparency, human rights, agricultural policies and intellectual property rights.

These issues require continuing and sustained engagement and discourse in order to find common ground and understanding, for mutual benefit.

"In this context, the MEF can provide an effective platform to assist the government in addressing these issues, in an open and constructive manner.

"Certainly, while support from the private sector has been forthcoming, it is hoped that the Malaysian government can support the MEF to undertake its activities over the longer term.

"I hope that the Prime Minister will lend support to the MEF in its efforts to help strengthen economic ties between Malaysia and the EU," Rafidah said.

"All these efforts will keep Malaysia's flag flying high, and we will ensure it goes even higher," she added. — Bernama

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