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Malaysia has been an active trading nation for decades. For the country to improve its revenue it has to step up on exports to earn foreign exchange earnings and, most importantly, remain competitive.

Regulatory burden is one aspect of trading across borders which PEMUDAH (the Special Task Force to Facilitate Business) has been scrutinising to stem out the unnecessary regulations.

Performance on trading across borders was associated with three sets of procedures—documentary compliance, border compliance and domestic transport—within the overall process of exporting or importing a shipment of goods.

The Doing Business indicator looks uniquely at the time and cost associated with documentary and border requirements and regulations mandatory for a shipment to cross the economy's border.

If we keep our processes complicated, we stand to risk losing our long-time business partners.

The key message businesses need to know is whether processes to get the merchandise out of the country (exported) can be digitised and made simpler. They would not have to make physical appearances if digital signatures are accepted while the forms could be made simpler. All these would result in reduction of procedures and cutting cost and time. Such processes should then be institutionalised for the benefit of government agencies and the private sector.

Good Regulatory Practice (GRP) are internationally recognised processes for improving quality of regulations which means whatever licences and regulations we currently have in place must be reviewed, have a sunset clause and cannot be archaic.

In some instances, we tend to do over-policing for compliance of documents when our partners do not require them which results in longer waiting time for containers at the ports, for instance.

Bilateral trade agreements provide for tariff exemptions and we must adhere to them.

Private-public consultation continues to play an important part for PEMUDAH and now the industry players are insisting that issues must be resolved in 60 days.

During the COVID 19 pandemic period, the government was engaging with us namely the supply chain in logistics - players which include warehouse operators, manufacturers, retailers, hauliers, freight forwarders, port operators, depot gate operators, other government agencies and the customs department to see how we can get operations started.

To ensure continuity of the supply chain for essential products and services, the government allowed only certain sectors to operate during the first Movement Control Order (MCO). We convinced the Minister of Transport that many of the import cargo containers lying in the ports could contain essential items too, especially perishables.

Ports were getting congested then as ships kept unloading containers. It was a tough period and the government had to adjust the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to authorise the owners to collect their goods and return to their premises.

Malaysia has reopened its borders since April 1 2022 but the issue of port congestion remains. Now we face a shortage of ships making port calls, reason being many are already laden in other countries which were not in lockdowns hence their ports have been busy.

Container shipping cycle was affected due to the shortage of containers as they are not returned to the ports fast enough, resulting in high container charges and sea freight costs which unfortunately is transferred to the consumers through higher food costs.

Ninety per cent of the merchandise consignment from Malaysia is shipped.

The Technical Working Group on Trading Across Borders (TWGTAB) explored other means of transport when shipping costs soared including alternative modes of transport like low-cost air carriers but we did not find them feasible by way of cost. It was unfortunate during the MCO period for Malaysia to be blamed for the late shipments for both the automotive and electrical and electronics industries which impacted the supply chain.

It is to the interest of our border control to reduce the number of procedures and improve our global rankings which have slipped over the years. The Doing Business indicator looks uniquely at the time and cost associated with documentary and border requirements and regulations mandatory for a shipment to cross the economy's border This also includes the unnecessary landside charges imposed by shipping lines to the shippers.

The uCustoms, a fully integrated, end-to-end Customs modern solution that delivers 'Single Window' for goods clearance, which was launched a few years ago, has not been implemented yet otherwise it could have reduced the documentation and lowered costs.

Even if we move the document flow fast enough it does not make sense if the goods take a longer period to move out of the port, so we also have to address port efficiency issues here.