

# Ramphal

## gives Mahathir top marks

From SAAD HASHIM

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LONDON: Commonwealth Secretary-General Sir Shridath Ramphal was perhaps the happiest man towards the close of the Vancouver summit when Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced that Malaysia would host the next summit in 1989.

To him it meant that although Dr Mahathir had been one of group's most vocal critics, Malaysia still regarded the Commonwealth as worthy of support.

In an interview recently he said: "Dr Mahathir explained at Vancouver that he had studies done on relative benefits for Malaysia in the Commonwealth and he had come out on the right side.

"He himself was pleased with the Commonwealth summit and had offered to host the next summit. That is a very handsome, generous, constructive and enlightened approach. It was greatly appreciated."

Sir Shridath said he had never taken the view that Dr Mahathir was not a great lover of the Commonwealth. He felt that the Malaysian Prime Minister was expressing some very genuinely-held criticisms of the Commonwealth.

"I have always felt that those were criticisms that ultimately helped the Commonwealth; that we must take them seriously. I have always taken them seriously.

"My hope has always been that Dr Mahathir would help

us make the Commonwealth strong in the ways he wanted it to see it strong.

"This he has done. He has done repeatedly at all the Commonwealth occasions which he has been identified with — at the regional meeting in Sydney and at the last summit in Nassau."

Sir Sridath, who is now in the third year of his third five-year term as the Secretary-General of this organisation of 47 nations of former British colonies, was also appreciative of Dr Mahathir's contributions at the Vancouver meeting.

### Absurd fees

Dr Mahathir also took what is now a very traditional leadership role for Malaysia on the whole issue of apartheid.

"Many, many years ago, Tunku Abdul Rahman really led the Commonwealth in the successful move to expel South Africa. Dr Mahathir has been extremely vigorous and outspoken in his criticism of apartheid, and in the economic sanctions against South Africa."

Is there any area of the Commonwealth Dr Mahathir is still not happy about?

"Well, I think he was very critical of the policy adopted by member-countries like Britain, Australia and Canada over overseas students fees.

"That is a matter over which I welcome his criticisms and

the strength with which he expressed them. I believe we are beginning to turn the corner ... just a little."

Are you saying Britain, Australia and Canada are changing their policies on overseas students fees?

"No, the way some of the changes are being made are not in my view fully satisfactory. I want to see a new fee structure which would not force Commonwealth students to pay the absurd fees that are being demanded at the moment.

"I would like to see Commonwealth students in Britain, for example, no less fairly treated than students from the EC countries. How could we justify a situation in which Commonwealth students are required to pay something like 10 times the fees payable by students from France or Germany or those from French territories in the Caribbean like Guadaloupe, Martinique or from the Pacific? This is absurd.

"What they are doing is they are trying to get around the high fees by increasing the number of fellowships and scholarships for Commonwealth students.

"They are not nearly enough ... but Western countries have begun to see that it is a short-sighted policy and not in their own interest."

Other countries outside the Commonwealth, he said, are very quick to fill the gap. France, Germany and Japan are some of them.

Of course, at Vancouver, Malaysia gave full support to this idea of a Commonwealth

University in the sky.

It is not a substitute for bringing down overseas students fees but is an attempt to bring university education to millions of young people who might otherwise not have access to it.

It will be a form of Distance Learning and open university using television and radio. This way, students can obtain degrees without going to a university campus.

Dr Mahathir was angry with the Commonwealth for letting Malaysia down on this issue.

"But the Commonwealth did help. We spoke out. We established a committee to study student mobility.

"I'd like to think that Dr Mahathir has been encouraged by the capacity of the Commonwealth to stand for principles, even if it is in disagreement with Britain.

"This is not a Commonwealth in which any country, even Britain, can exercise a veto."

### Consensus

Which way do you think the summit in Kuala Lumpur in 1989 will turn?

"I think the Kuala Lumpur summit is going to be a great occasion. It will be a further step in the evolution of the Commonwealth.

"Every meeting is its own meeting. Two years does not seem like a long time, but many things will change.

"Who would have said in Nassau that Fiji would be a great item at Vancouver. Who knows what the situation will

be two years from now?"

"It would be wonderful if Kuala Lumpur could be the occasion for the Commonwealth to see a free South Africa with a new leadership and with people like Mandela and Tambo who will bring the country back to the Commonwealth.

"And don't forget Namibia which is languishing in the wake of the South African intransigence at the moment. Let us hope Namibia will help us to get the magical number of 50 member countries."

What about Fiji?

Dr Mahathir has said if the Commonwealth were to consider Fiji's re-admission, the question of consensus should not perhaps be strictly adhered to. Objection from one or two member nations should not stop Fiji from rejoining. How do you react to that?

"Well, the Commonwealth would, of course, have to decide to change its rules before that could happen. The rules were quite clear and it was reiterated at Vancouver that any decision of this kind involving membership or non-membership requires unanimity. I feel fairly sure myself that it is not the rule the Commonwealth would easily change.

"The Commonwealth will insist on unanimity on the question of membership. It all depends on how Fiji puts its house in order.

"The root to Fiji's return to the Commonwealth does not lie in the way the Commonwealth reaches its decision. It has to do with what happens in Fiji in getting away from present developments."