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Envoy-Abdullah

FROM PRISON WALLS TO THE GILDED HALLS OF UNITED NATIONS

By: Abd Muin Abd Majid

KUALA LUMPUR, May 28 (Bernama) -- The interview lasted 45 minutes; in essence it was much shorter as the telephone rang incessantly with invitations asking Datuk Abdullah Ahmad for lunch or meetings.

Malaysia's newly-appointed Special Envoy to the United Nations (UN) scribbled down the messages on the table planner.

We were in the spartan "transit room" of Wisma Putra, so called because it is the room where incoming or outgoing ambassadors are based before they moved to their next postings.

He laughed when informed that the receptionist had earlier directed this writer to the offices of Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi instead.

"The man I'm succeeding is very distinguished. It will be quite a task for me to match him. But I'm very confident that I can do it," said the 58-year-old former Kok Lanas Member of Parliament as he reflected on taking over from Tan Sri Musa Hitam.

Indeed, high office and self-confidence are no stranger to the once political advisor to the nation's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, and a deputy minister who also made the news when he was detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) in 1976 for alleged subversive activities.

Asked how he felt about that episode in his colourful political career, Abdullah said: "The first thing is, my conscience is clear. It does not matter what people think of me because I know who I am, which is more important.

"In my case, it had been all lies. It was widely believed then because those who lied were in power. My advice is, never malign people."

Abdullah, who was released from detention in 1981, said he did not harbour any ill-feelings.

"I'm grateful to Allah. I've forgiven them although I've not forgotten. And I hope those who had done me in -- which stopped me from reaching my potential -- are happy if they are still alive. I'm happy and I shall always be happy," he said.

He thanked Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for the confidence shown in him.

"I just want to do my job. I'm very glad that the PM has asked me to do it and I won't let him down. I'll do it as best as I can for the sake of Malaysia and Asean.

"In fact, Dr Mahathir asked me to take up the post two years ago. However, I asked him if he would agree to my taking it this year. He agreed," said Abdullah, adding that one rarely declined an offer by the Prime Minister.

Abdullah said it was high time that he accepted the job as 1996 will be an important year for Malaysia at the UN as its Permanent Representative, Tan Sri Razali Ismail, is expected to be elected President of the UN General Assembly for the 1996-97 term.

"I'm very happy to be there at this juncture as the election of Razali will be an honour for Malaysia. It shows that our foreign policy is not only working but also effective," he added.

Abdullah said that he, like Musa, will be assisting Razali "who will be very busy presiding at the general assembly".

He said Malaysia will continue to be the voice of the countries of the South, "to help others who, for one reason or another, won't or daren't say

what they should say".

Abdullah said Malaysia is in a good position to do this because it is stable politically and economically. "Besides, Dr Mahathir is an able and effective spokesman of the South," he added.

"If you yourself are in a mess, how can you talk on behalf of the others?" said Abdullah, adding that unlike some other countries which only talked, Malaysia matched its words with humanitarian deeds and financial assistance.

"You can't be a player in international diplomacy if you don't have money. In the case of Dr Mahathir, he talks but he also gives practical help," he said.

Abdullah also said the restructuring of the UN must be made to clearly reflect the present geopolitical and geoeconomic situations as well as the new power equations.

"We must restructure the UN so that it becomes useful not only to the big powers but also to smaller countries and make it really multilateral and consistent with what we want the world to be," he said.

Asked whether he would be better off financially with his new job, Abdullah jokingly said: "I'm now a nouveau pauvre (new poor) as a result of taking up this job, not a nouveau riche (new rich)."

He leaves for New York with his wife, Datin Fauzah Abdullah who is a former diplomat, on June 15 to begin the two-year term. -- BERNAMA

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