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MALAYSIAN INVESTOR'S MISSION TO RECONSTRUCT CAMBODIA

By: M. Jegathesan

LANGKAWI, July 30 (Bernama) -- It takes more than just money and dreams to help reconstruct a war-torn country like Cambodia.

But, fired by his strong belief in creating stability and wealth through Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's "prosper thy neighbour" prescription, Malaysian entrepreneur Tan Sri Dr Chen Lip Keong of Ariston Sdn Bhd has emerged as Cambodia's largest foreign investor.

He has embarked on a challenging mission spanning 10 years to help reconstruct Cambodia under what is popularly known as the Sihanoukville project.

Dr Chen has taken up the challenge to put his money in the country that still evokes chilling memories of its war-time "Killing Fields" atrocities where millions of Cambodians were slaughtered.

The mammoth RM2.5-billion infrastructure project involves redevelopment of Kang Keng Airport, construction of a 361-room international resort and a power plant.

Ariston won the international contract in January 1995 but bureaucratic delays and other problems arising from what he describes as Cambodia's "sensibilities and sensitivities" have stalled construction work.

On May 11, 50 villagers armed with rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and long knives staged a demonstration to demand compensation from the company for land alienated for the airport project. They tore down a fence at Ariston's work site at Kang Keng Airport in Sihanoukville.

"I am not discouraged. I believe problems can be overcome by discussions and I am committed to the development of Cambodia," said Dr Chen, who is also executive chairman of FACB Bhd.

His investments in Cambodia have been hailed by corporate and government leaders who are gathered here for the Langkawi International Dialogue (LID) as an almost perfect example of forging long-term win-win situations through "smart partnerships" between individuals, companies and governments.

Dr Chen is also chairman of The Commonwealth Foundation for Technology Management (CFTM), one of the main sponsors for the dialogue.

He said the dialogue could serve as a platform to address business woes, and Cambodian First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh, who is here to attend the LID, is a strong proponent of a government-business partnership.

Asked about his business philosophy in Cambodia, Dr Chen said many problems related to his projects have been resolved through discussions and patience.

He said military strategies could be incorporated into the business world where the highest art of warfare was to turn enemies into disciples and competitors into friends.

This was what smart partnership was all about -- to create as many bilateral and multilateral business relations as possible and with the minimum fuss, he added.

Dr Chen portrays Cambodia's future in positive terms, especially with the country expected to be accepted as another member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) next year and the fact that it is strategically nestled in the Mekong Basin which has a market of about 350 million people.

Besides involvement in the Sihanoukville project, Ariston owns the

weekly Cambodia Times English language newspaer, a casino, a bank and an educational resort, the Regent College in Cambodia. -- BERNAMA

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