

18 SEP 1996

Razali-Presidency

RAZALI PROMISES TO BE A PROACTIVE PRESIDENT OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

By: Salmy Hashim

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 18 (Bernama) -- Tan Sri Razali Ismail, who assumed the presidency of the 51st United Nations General Assembly Tuesday, promised to be a "proactive" rather than "ceremonial" president working towards change within the UN.

As president, he said, he would "at all cost" avoid bloodshed and massacres the likes of Bosnia and Rwanda to happen.

"These things happen because power politics got in the way of actual rescue packages that the UN could have undertaken. I passionately and truly believe that if the UN had stood for real universal values, Bosnia and Rwanda would not have happened," said Razali who was elected by acclamation by 185-member states.

He believed that Malaysia could make an impact within the UN with the support of institutions in Malaysia, Wisma Putra, and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"I don't think we will see immediate changes, but I will work towards reforming the Security Council. If we (the UNGA) can put together a package that would satisfy two-thirds of the UN membership, I'm prepared to put it for a vote. I'm not going to wait for a consensus because consensus can mean that any country can veto whatever they don't like," he said in an interview just hours before the election.

He said, if the reform package, that would promote equitable representation and expand the membership of the council, benefited the developing countries or the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), "then I'll go for it."

A career diplomat for the past 30 years, Razali said that he had never considered himself as president of the UNGA. "I've always thought that the job was ceremonial and I was not interested."

"It's only now, with changes in NAM, and the developing countries trying to balance the relationship between the Security Council and the GA, that the context of the job became more interesting...more worthwhile."

While the job, which included overseeing the five working groups that would help reform the UN, would pose a challenge for him, Razali said it also appeared intimidating because of the daunting tasks that lay in the year ahead.

Razali, known for his frankness during his eight years as permanent representative, said that it would not be possible for him to be vocal, but he would probably have to "neutralise" his opinions as president of the General Assembly.

"But the president should take strong passionate stands on behalf of humanity, on behalf of the environment, on behalf of the planet."

Not one to shy away from criticising the UN or Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Razali was asked to comment on his relationship with the secretary-general and the latter's bid for a second term.

"This is not a personalised vendetta. We want the right man for the right job. As president of the GA, when it comes to selecting a secretary-general, I promise you it'll become a transparent and impartial exercise. Malaysia's position will not colour my judgement -- we'll be looking not at the personality, but what would benefit members the most."

"On a personal level we're cordial -- not close friends -- (but) no reason why we can't work together," he said.

Boutros-Ghali appeared warm in welcoming the Malaysian diplomat to the stage inside the General Assembly Hall at the UN. Boutros-Ghali was quick to embrace Razali after he was handed the gavel by his Portuguese predecessor, Prof Diogo Freitas do Amaral.

Razali also talked about United States relations with the UN. The UN should regain US confidence in the system, while the US should stop its UN-bashing session because the "US really need the UN", he said.

Delegates from various regions who heard the president's inaugural speech appeared confident that Razali could carry out his task effectively.

US permanent representative Madeleine Albright described the speech as setting a very important tone for the GA. "He said, last year we celebrated, this year we're going to work -- that's similar to the US agenda and we're very pleased with the tone set by the new president of the GA from Malaysia."

Permanent representative from Cameroon, Paul Bamela Engo described Razali as a dynamic person from a dynamic country who would "no doubt be a source of pride to the Third World."

South Korean ambassador to the UN, Soo Gil Park, described Razali as "knowledgable and energetic. I believe that during his proactive leadership, the 51st GA will achieve a lot." -- BERNAMA

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