

31 JUL 1996

Ranariddh

NOTHING SERIOUS, SAYS RANARIDDH OF HIS PROBLEMS WITH HUN SEN

By: Azman Ujang

LANGKAWI, July 31 (Bernama) -- Cambodian First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh said today both he and Second Prime Minister Hun Sen will not resort to the use of force to resolve their political problems.

He said the problems are not as serious as portrayed by the Western media.

"The Westerners have never ceased to give us a lesson on democracy and when we have differences in ideas due to the pluralistic nature of our people, the Western media will play them up. But I can assure you there is nothing very serious," he said in an interview with Bernama at his Pelangi Beach Resort hotel suite here.

Ranariddh, who is here to attend the second Langkawi International Dialogue, said his problems with Hun Sen were largely due to their contrasting styles brought about by differences in cultural backgrounds.

"I was trained in France, more liberal but less outspoken. In contrast, Hun Sen is not very liberal but very outspoken," he said in the one-hour interview in which he spoke on a wide range of domestic, economic, regional and international issues.

According to Western media reports, Ranariddh recently threatened to pull his Funcipec Party out of the Royal Cambodian government after accusing the Cambodian People's Party headed by Hun Sen of unequal power sharing at the district and provincial levels.

The reports said that in May Ranariddh, his father King Norodom Sihanouk and two half-brothers Prince Norodom Sirivudh and Prince Norodom Chakrapong met in Paris in the wake of Ranariddh's pull-out threat.

In retaliation, Hun Sen was reported to have said that he would use force to prevent any attempts to dissolve the government by unconstitutional means.

Ranariddh said both he and Hun Sen were determined to engage in dialogue to amicably resolve their problems.

"There is nothing very profound in our differences and there won't be any need for the use of any kind of force," he added.

To prove his point, the premier said both he and Hun Sen last month attended a meeting with the World Bank in Tokyo to enable the bank to assess the situation in Cambodia ahead of plans to continue providing aid for the country's reconstruction.

He said the World Bank was satisfied with the political stability of Cambodia, its democratic reforms and plans being put in place for the country's next general elections due in 1998.

Ranariddh said things are looking up in his country and people like himself who became politicians in order to serve Cambodians who elected them into office could not afford to waste time in petty political quarrels.

This is especially so for a country with a tragic past like Cambodia.

"Having lost 20 years and two million people because of power struggles among politicians, Cambodia has a lot of catching up to do in national reconstruction. The most important thing is political stability but I am happy to say that both politically and economically, we are heading for a more stable future," he said.

Ranariddh said billions of dollars in foreign investments have begun to flow into Cambodia, representing a massive dose of foreign investor confidence in the country's future.

Coupled with massive aid mainly for the development of infrastructure from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and Japan -- all of which are vital to attract foreign investments -- plus a package of liberal rules and regulations being put in place, Cambodia and Cambodians are in for greater stability and prosperity.

The times ahead promise to be exciting because Cambodia is due to be accepted as the eighth member of Asean next year and this has come close on the heels of the United States granting Cambodia Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status last week.

The MFN status -- which provides preferential tariffs for a list of over 4,000 export items -- has given the country an edge over others like Vietnam and Myanmar.

"Vietnam and Myanmar are not expected to be granted MFN status for some time yet because the Americans are sensitive about issues like human rights," he added.

Dressed in dark blue bush jacket, Ranariddh looked very relaxed but remarked that although he has tremendous passion for his "difficult" job of Prime Minister, he does not have much patience.

"You need to have both passion and patience as Prime Minister of Cambodia. But I must admit I am an impatient man...how could you have patience when my country has so much catching up to do especially now that we are going to be a member of Asean which (with the exception of Vietnam) is already developing far ahead," he said.

Ranariddh cited very positive economic indicators for Cambodia.

The inflation rate, which was at 121 per cent in 1991, came down to a lowly three per cent last year.

The economy grew by 5.4 per cent in 1994 but hit 7.6 per cent last year. For the next five years it is expected to average seven per cent. In addition, the currency, riel, has stabilised and this "is the best indicator for Cambodia's foreign reserve strength as well as the trust Cambodians have in their country".

Ranariddh said in many ways he tries to be as relaxed as Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Dr Mahathir is 71 years old but he looks so much younger. I can see that he hardly has grey hair. I don't know what are his secrets, but I can tell you that in trying to stay young, I am not taking any ginseng," he said in jest.

The premier also said he is opposed to the policy of isolating Myanmar just for the purpose of getting it to democratise and improve its human rights record.

He said while the United States government is critical of Myanmar, Americans comprise the first and largest foreign investors there, adding that this double-standard is unacceptable. -- BERNAMA

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