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Cambodia-Roundup

CAMBODIA AIMS FOR THE SKY AFTER ENDING POLITICAL STRIFE

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KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 7 (Bernama) -- The formation of a new coalition government in Cambodia last November brings with it the expectation that the country will finally be heading towards a long-lasting "peace, development and nation-building".

As stated by Prime Minister Hun Sen at a function during his recently-concluded visit to Malaysia, development and economy were the priorities of the new government.

"Everyone wants to lead an adequate living, free from poverty caused by wars, genocidal regimes, national divisions and outside interference," he said.

Hun Sen made use of his various engagements in Kuala Lumpur to drive home the point that there is now stability in his country and urged Malaysian investors to step up trade and investment in Cambodia.

In an interview with a regional news magazine last December, Hun Sen gave an assurance that the new government, comprising his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and Prince Norodom Ranariddh's Funcinpec party, would last its five-year term.

In July 1997, Hun Sen ousted his then co-prime minister Ranariddh in a bloody coup just before Cambodia was slated to join the regional grouping of Asean.

He was quoted as saying in the interview: "It's like a husband and wife who are back together after being separated. One has to be more cautious with each other, at least more respectful."

Under the new power structure in Phnom Penh, Ranariddh now holds the presidency of the Cambodian National Assembly.

Certainly, the long-suffering Cambodian people themselves are hoping that after years of war and political turmoil, they would be able to reap the rewards of stability in their homeland.

This was what Hun Sen had in mind when he told a gathering of politicians and intellectuals here that the Cambodian government could now concentrate on its five-year reform programme of social and economic development, especially in areas such as education, public health and agriculture.

As the number one foreign investor in the former French colony with investments amounting to RM1.7 billion last year, Malaysia is well-placed to play an important role to assist Cambodia in its development process. There are currently 70 Malaysian companies investing in Cambodia and 30 of them are in the form of joint ventures with Cambodian partners.

The investments are in infrastructure development, power generation, tourism, banking, property development, oil refining, education and telecommunications.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has pledged that the participation of the Malaysian private sector in rebuilding and developing Cambodia would continue to be encouraged.

During Hun Sen's three-day visit, both countries also signed a bilateral agreement to increase two-way trade which stood at RM175.4 million for the first 11 months last year.

Malaysia has also agreed to look into the possibility of importing Cambodian agricultural products as well as its request for training in fields such as industry, diplomacy, oil and gas as well as agriculture.

Cambodia's membership in Asean also came under the spotlight when he

criticised the nine-member regional club for insisting that a senate be formed in his country before it could formally join the nine-member grouping. Malaysia is a strong supporter of an early Cambodian entry into Asean.

Describing the establishment of the senate as Cambodia's internal affair, Hun Sen said: "The setting up of the senate is not to please Asean but to please the Cambodian people."

He also spoke at length about the complexities of bringing former Khmer Rouge leaders to justice for war crimes.

Hun Sen expressed his apprehension that attempts to put such leaders on trial might jeopardise Cambodia's new-found peace and that his people would resort to fighting again.

However, a team of United Nations legal experts which recently visited Cambodia is assessing evidence and may recommend how legal proceedings against the Khmer Rouge regime leaders might be conducted.

During the regime's 1975-1979 reign of terror, more than two million Cambodians lost their lives from forced labour, torture, execution and malnutrition.

Hun Sen's visit was at the invitation of Dr Mahathir.

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