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Fernando-Challenge

SRI LANKAN ENVOY MOVES ON TO A BIGGER CHALLENGE

KUALA LUMPUR, July 22 (Bernama) -- Given the choice, he would prefer to stay on as Sri Lanka's High Commissioner to Malaysia. But Colombo has bigger plans for Lionel Fernando.

Come Monday, he will assume the post of Secretary-General of the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ending a one-and-a-half year tour of duty in Malaysia against a normal three-year minimum tenure.

"I am required by my Government to report to my ministry as the Secretary-General," he told Bernama in a farewell interview, here.

But the silver-haired Fernando is taking it all in stride, saying that he would love to take up the challenge.

The 63-year old career diplomat said one of his priorities here had been to project the true picture of his country to the multiracial and multilingual people of Malaysia.

This he did with the help of mission staff and fellow countrymen here, by imparting the correct information about Sri Lanka, including by addressing various local organisations and interactions with Malaysians from all walks of life.

"Otherwise, if there is misinformation, that means that people will miss out as to what that particular country is like. What I have been doing is building bridges between Malaysia and my country," he said.

Turning to economic exchanges between the two countries, Fernando hoped that Malaysia would increase its imports from Sri Lanka in line with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's "prosper-thy-neighbour" mantra.

High Commission statistics show that from January to March this year, Malaysia exported RM129.4 million worth of products to Sri Lanka while the Indian Ocean island nation exported goods valued at RM6.68 million to Malaysia.

Among Malaysia's major imports from Sri Lanka are office machines and automatic data processing equipment, garments, rubber products, general industrial machinery and equipment, textile yarn and fabrics, and fruits and vegetables.

On the other hand, Sri Lanka imported from Malaysia, among other things, petroleum and related products, vegetable oils, non-metallic mineral products, iron and steel, specialised machinery, telecommunications equipment, furniture and medicinal and pharmaceutical products.

Fernando was also confident that with signs pointing towards an Asian economic recovery, Malaysian companies, new ones or those which are holding back investment plans due to the regional economic crisis, would flock back to Sri Lanka to take advantage of the wide-ranging investment opportunities under the aegis of the Sri Lankan Board of Investment (BOI).

Earlier this year, the BOI said Sri Lanka lost about US\$500 million (US\$1=RM3.80) worth of potential investment from Malaysia and South Korea, among the countries hit by economic and financial woes.

Fernando said Colombo would persevere in its efforts to attract more investments from Malaysia.

He also spoke at length about his country's constitutional reforms and devolution of power to the provinces.

"I know that these reforms are very, very far reaching as they include land matters, police powers, the appointment of governors and their powers and so on," Fernando said.

He also said a very unique institution, called the Constitutional

Council, was being evolved in Sri Lanka which would comprise 15 members, including the prime minister and the Opposition leader.

One of the functions of the proposed council would be to make decisions on top-notch appointments such as the attorney-general, auditor-general, election commissioners and even Supreme Court judges, he said.

On the on-going struggle by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to establish a separate state in the Jaffna peninsula for the Tamils, Fernando said what was important was a relentless effort on the part of the Sri Lankan political leadership to pursue peace.

"We need to have a few Nelson Mandelas, Yasser Arafats or Jerry Adams in order to win the peace for Sri Lanka. Winning the peace is far, far more difficult than winning a war," he said.

The outgoing envoy said time was running out for any country which was waging long years of war "with guns and bombs" and that it was important for the conflicting sides to sit down together to discuss things.

On a lighter note, Fernando said he had had a very pleasant stay in Malaysia with the smiling faces of friendly and helpful Malaysians forever etched in his memory.

He is married to Somalatha Subasinghe, a dramatist and theatre director, with two grown-up daughters and is the proud grandfather of a three-year old girl.

-- BERNAMA

MAM RYN