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Strengthening bilateral ties with Asia's most misunderstood man

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ONE of the most misunderstood men in Asia is in town. To many in the West, he has been described as defiant, a dictator and a thug. To others who know him, he is a patriot, a fighter and a pragmatic leader.

For the first time since becoming sole Prime Minister of Cambodia, Malaysians will have the opportunity to welcome Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Compared to his arch-rival Prince Norodom Ranariddh, he appears uncouth and unsophisticated. He has been fighting for his country since he was a young man.

He readily admits to being a peasant and has had no time to learn such acceptable pleasantries as the French language or "civilised behaviour" so appreciated by the West. He has always remained in his country and fought for it, even losing an eye for that cause.

His visit comes at the invitation of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and to enhance the already strong relations between the countries.

Hun Sen will also express Cambodia's appreciation for Malaysia's strong support on his country's membership into Asean.

The leaders will discuss bilateral, regional and international issues of mutual concern. The discussions may also include an update of the political developments in Cambodia.

According to reports from Cambodia, Hun Sen will reassure investors that Cambodia is politically stable and safe for business and encourage more new investments from Malaysia.

Before the political turmoil in Cambodia, Malaysia was the largest investor in the country with RM5.9 billion, among others, in hotel construction, shopping complexes, real estate, tourism and transportation.

Hun Sen and Dr Mahathir will witness the signing of a trade agreement between both Governments.

Malaysia and Cambodia already have an investment guarantee agreement which was signed in 1994.

Cambodia was expected to join Asean in 1997 along with Myanmar and Laos. Unfortunately, events in the country caused Asean to postpone the entry until a "proper" Government was in place.

Just two weeks before its entry into Asean, Hun Sen took control of the country in what the international community called a coup d'etat, a term which Hun Sen emphatically denied.

He insisted that he did not oust his co-Prime Minister. Ranariddh fled to France on his own accord.

After nearly a year of intense negotiations between the two leaders, an agreement was reached and elections were held in July last year.

More than 95 per cent of the nearly five million eligible voters took part in the election.

The result was 41 per cent for Cambodian People's Party, 32 per cent for Funcinpec and 14 per cent for the self-named Sam Rainsy party.

This time despite 500 observers from more than 135 countries declaring that the elections were free and fair, the opposition parties led by Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy alleged that CPP won through intimidation and fraud and refused to accept the results.

Finally, after months of bickering and accusations, on Nov 14, a coalition was formed between CPP and Funcinpec.

Together, they formed a Government with 107 seats out of 122 in the

National Assembly.

This breakthrough agreement required the formation of a new Upper House or Senate, to be headed by Ranariddh. Hun Sen became Prime Minister.

The formation of the Senate will require an amendment to the constitution.

Cambodia had hoped that with this agreement it would be formally accepted as Asean's tenth and final member at the recent Asean Summit in Hanoi last December.

Unfortunately, the country's official entry into the grouping has been held up until the actual formation of the new Senate.

Malaysia was a strong supporter for Cambodia's entry last year.

Meanwhile, another twist was added to Cambodia's political developments. Two leaders, Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, of the Khmer Rouge which ruled Cambodia from 1975 and 1979 surrendered late last year.

Under the Khmer Rouge regime an estimated 1.7 million people died from torture, starvation, and execution before it was removed by Vietnamese forces.

Many people inside and outside Cambodia were dismayed when it seemed that these two leaders would escape being brought to trial for their crimes against humanity.

Hun Sen has agreed that the Khmer Rouge leaders must be brought to justice and is waiting for proposal from a team of United Nations jurists on how and where the trial will be held.

Earlier, in an interview with the French newspaper Le Monde, he had said that the crimes against humanity should be expanded to include the years between 1970 and 1998.

"We should find justice for those who died from 1970 to 1975, 1975 to 1979 and from 1979 to 1998. The dead from each demand the same justice," he said.

He has since agreed that the trials should only concern the time period of the Khmer Rouge rule.

The proposal by the UN jurists is to be presented to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan this month and a trial may take place some time this year.

Had the time frame been expanded it would have implicated the US (which wanted to stop Hanoi's regional expansion at the time), that had just lost the Vietnam war, as well as other members of the international community which had supported the Khmer Rouge despite their knowledge of the infamous "killing fields".

After all the internal turmoil, Cambodia and Hun Sen are ready to take an active role in the international community.

This visit will certainly strengthen the strong existing ties between the two countries and enhance Asean friendship and co-operation.

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