

11/09/2000

My decision is final, says Ahmad Tajuddin

Ashraf Abdullah

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Former Tenaga Nasional Berhad executive chairman Tan Sri Dr Ahmad Tajuddin Ali said his decision to quit the utility giant was final as it would give the new board of directors and management the opportunity to start on a "clean slate".

In a two-and-a-half-hour interview with the New Straits Times and Business Times today, Ahmad Tajuddin (picture), who was also the chief executive officer, said he strongly supported the idea of separation of powers between the management and board.

"My position has always been that a clear separation of powers between the management and board is a prerequisite to good corporate governance."

Ahmad Tajuddin spoke frankly and candidly throughout the interview, which covered his reasons for quitting TNB, his visions, satisfaction and unaccomplished dreams.

He said when he was appointed in 1996, he was apprehensive about being made both executive chairman and CEO.

"It is difficult to switch hats at a meeting."

However, he said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told him that he (Ahmad Tajuddin) needed both the powers of the board and executive to turn around TNB from a loss-oriented government utility agency into a profitable organisation.

"After a few weeks at TNB, I knew the Prime Minister was right because of the enormity of the task. Morale was low and everything was not right. I had to use the authority as board chairman to get things moving," he said.

He undertook a massive restructuring exercise, which has since turned TNB into a profitable organisation with profit exceeding RM1 billion.

Ahmad Tajuddin was appointed executive chairman, replacing Tan Sri Dr Ani Arope, on Sept 1, 1996.

He said that as TNB was now a giant corporate organisation, it needed a clear separation of powers between the board and chairman.

Ahmad Tajuddin added that when the idea to separate the position of the chairman and chief executive was mooted a few months ago, he fully supported it.

"The compromise (to separate the two positions) was to be made at the end of my contract. I was quite prepared for it. I did not know who the chairman or chief executive was going to be. I could be offered either, or none.

"I made up my mind on Aug 23. I was thinking all along that it would be better for me to go. This will enable the new management to act without being encumbered by my presence.

"I knew the Government is going to implement these changes. So, I said goodbye to the board and staff."

Ahmad Tajuddin said on Aug 30, he bade farewell to the senior management of TNB.

He also told Energy, Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Amar Leo Moggie that even if he was offered the president and CEO post, he would turn it down.

He added that on Sept 1, he received a letter from the Ministry of Finance offering him the post of president and CEO.

"But since I had already decided, I requested more time to think about the offer and inform the Prime Minister before formally leaving TNB," he

said, adding that he requested until the end of this month to make up his mind.

However, he said, on Sept 4, he received another letter from the Ministry informing him he had until Sept 6 to accept the offer or it would be assumed that he had rejected it.

"I did not reply to the letter," he said.

On the appointment of a politician to the board of TNB, Ahmad Tajuddin said there were things which perhaps a politician could do that he could not.

On his future plans, Ahmad Tajuddin said he had had a few offers from both local and foreign companies.

"I will consider them," he said.

He added that he would leave for Saudi Arabia to perform umrah in a month or so and would make his decision when he returned.

"In the meantime, I may want to improve on my handicap," he said, referring to golf, his pastime interest.

It will be a good break, for he had spent the last four years on his toes.

"Everytime the light blinked, I'd reach for the phone and call my officers just to find out if there was a problem."