

# 'Myanmar problem cannot be solved by confrontation'

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**Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in Japan for a working visit from Jan 17 to 20. The Prime Minister visited Osaka to attend the launch of his book 'Reflections on Asia' and deliver a keynote address at a symposium organised by the Mainichi newspapers. During an interview with the *Mainichi Shimbun*, Dr Mahathir spoke on his recent visit to Myanmar. Below is the text of the Question and Answer session.**

**Q: Why did you go to Myanmar?**

**A:** At the conference of the Asean Summit in Singapore last November, Myanmar was supposed to explain the situation in the country in order that Asean might look into how to make progress.

Because of the shortage of time, the senior general (Than Shwe) was not able to explain the situation in Myanmar. We thought it would be good for me to hear from him about what the actual situation in Myanmar was like.

**Q: Were you the one to suggest discussions on Myanmar during the Singapore meeting?**

**A:** Yes, but initially, it was suggested by Singapore PM Goh Chok Tong. Malaysia and Singapore should get full information on Myanmar.

But the meeting was too short. Myanmar tried to explain to all the Asean leaders, but there were only 15 minutes. So I went to listen to him, to find out what progress Myanmar has made and what can be done in order to solve this problem about Myanmar being accused of having oppressive dictatorship, bad labour practice, using slave labour, etc.

est of Myanmar above party interests. And I think the Government is willing to discuss with Suu Kyi to find solutions for Myanmar.

That is good for the whole of Myanmar and its people.

**Q: Will you be the mediator for both sides?**

**A:** At the moment, Malaysia has been appointed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to try and resolve these things. I think it is best that we leave it to the United Nations.

**Q: What kind of resolution do you think is the best scenario?**

**A:** Well I suppose eventually they would have to have elections. But before they do, they must understand the conduct of elections.

We see sometimes elections being held in many countries but they do not reflect the feelings of the people. When elections are held, people must understand elections have limits. And not to use elections to undermine authority.

**Q: Did you talk about elections to Than Shwe?**

**A:** I spoke about these things generally.

**Q: And what did you find out?**

**A:** The Government may not be an elected Government. But there is no doubt that the present Government has opened up Myanmar to foreign investments. They are trying to improve the living condition of the people of Myanmar.

The accusation that they use slave labour is not true. In all the countries in East Asia and South-east Asia, we are used to using voluntary labour. If we are building a road for a certain village or town, the people of the village or town must contribute the labour. This helps to reduce the costs for a poor country.

When the British were ruling Myanmar, they also used the same kind of labour. For a poor Government, it is a way of taxing the people. Contributing the labour instead of money. So it is not really slave labour.

**Q: The present Government is not telling what it is doing in Myanmar.**

**A:** They are not used to having public relations, a sophisticated way of presenting their views. The interpretation of the foreigners especially the West is that they are not doing the right things. But there is no doubt that the present Government is trying to improve the living condition of the people.

**Q: How do you see the conflict between Aung San Suu Kyi and the present Government?**

**A:** That is something which cannot be solved through confrontation. What is needed is to put the inter-

**Q: Did he understand these things?**

**A:** Yes, yes. He is willing to hold the elections eventually. Well, the elections will not be held this year or next. It should be held in a few years.

They have to determine proper voter registration. You have to do it step by step. Even those countries which have accepted elections as a means of setting up the Government have not been able to carry out the elections properly.

**Q: Western Governments are on the side of Suu Kyi?**

**A:** It makes the Government very rigid. Because nobody likes foreign interference in one's internal affairs. And the less the West interferes, the better for solving the problems. Let the people of Myanmar decide for themselves.

**Q: Asean's key policy was the so-called non-interference policy. You have been suggesting about elections, etc to Myanmar. Is Asean changing the policy?**

**A:** No, it is because Myanmar is a special case. The West is trying to pressure Myanmar, pressure Asean.

While we do not want to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, we feel that the benefits of the kind of liberal democracy that we have in Asean countries should be exposed and made known to the people and Government of Myanmar so they will not reject the system.

Because this system is good and will ensure that the country can have the Government of its choice.