

03/11/2002

Dr M described as `major force`

Hardev Kaur; Saiful Azhar Abdullah; Roziana Hamsawi

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been a "major force in Asean" and done a marvelous job in promoting the unity of the Malaysian nation, according to Rodolfo Severino, the Asean secretary-general.

The outgoing secretary-general said this in reply to a question from an Australian journalist who wanted to know whether there will be "some sort of a farewell" for Dr Mahathir as this will be his last Asean summit.

Dr Mahathir has announced that he will step down from the post and relinquish all his Government and political posts next October.

Severino said: "I am sure very laudatory words will be pronounced in tribute to him (Dr Mahathir) because he has been a major force in Asean".

Severino, who had served as the Philippine ambassador to Kuala Lumpur before taking up his post as Asean secretary-general, said: "I have known Dr Mahathir for a long time and always held him in great respect because he has a very clear idea of what is good for his country. And he has the necessary backbone to carry out the policies that he thinks are good for his country.

"He has shown the capacity to exercise the leadership in a country such as Malaysia. He has done a marvelous job of promoting the unity of the Malaysian nation".

In reply to another question from the same journalist as to whether Dr Mahathir would oppose to the expansion of Asean, Severino said it was Dr Mahathir who has been the "primary moving force" in bringing Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam into the regional grouping.

Severino reminded the journalist that Asean itself is limited to South East Asian countries.

"So I don't know why you say that Dr Mahathir will oppose the expansion of Asean as he was one of the primary moving forces for bringing in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

"That is all of the Southeast Asian countries there are," he stressed.

Severino, who finishes his term as secretary-general at the end of this year, pointed out that Malaysia, "one of the most open trading regimes in the region, has been in the forefront of Asean's co-operation from the beginning".

Not happy with the answers, the journalist pressed Severino with another question claiming that if "Dr Mahathir has famously opposed the widening of the Asean grouping, why would he be persuaded to include a summit with Australia? (Australia is seeking to be included in the Asean process and wants an Asean-Australian Summit, similar to the Asean-India summit).

Severino said he did not know about Australia as "we (Asean) haven't really taken the decision on that. But certainly India is happening in the next couple of days".

The Asean-India summit will be held on Tuesday. In addition, the 10 members of Asean will hold summit meetings with China, Japan and South Korea following the Summit of the Asean Heads of Government which begins in the Cambodian capital on Monday.

Dr Mahathir is scheduled to arrive for the summit on Sunday afternoon.

Severino explained that this (Asean Plus summit) means that it is an indication of Asean's policy of reaching out particularly to its neighbours - China, Japan and South Korea, in the first place.

Asean has also held discussions with Australia and New Zealand for years on ways to promote trade and investment among them.

In fact last September Asean, Australian and New Zealand Trade Ministers expressed their intention to double trade between them in 10 years.