

22 OCT 2002

AL-QAEDA BOOK AUTHOR BEGAN CAREER IN NEWSPAPER

By: Feizal Samath

COLOMBO, Oct 22 (Bernama) -- The Sri Lankan author at the centre of a storm over allegations that sections of the Malaysian ruling coalition were linked to the Al-Qaeda terrorist network, started his writing career with the independent Sun newspaper in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s before reaching international "fame" as a defence specialist and strategist.

Dr Rohan Gunaratna, a former defence and terrorism specialist at the Centre for Study of Terrorism and Political Violence in Scotland, is known to be close to several intelligence agencies including India's RAW (Research & Analysis Wing), and has authored several books dealing with Sri Lankan Tamil Tiger rebels, leftwing Sinhalese rebels in Sri Lanka and the role of Indian Peace Keeping Forces in Sri Lanka.

The Malaysian government this week accused Gunaratna of linking Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed's ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) to Osama bin Laden's network through the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebel group in the Philippines, and demanded that that the references be withdrawn.

Gunaratna has denied the charge but admitted, however, that he did say - in his book on the Al Qaeda - the MILF maintains some links with individuals in the National Front.

"I have not read the book but I believe in principle the Malaysian government should not take a hard line approach as Gunaratna has not named Mahathir apart from some people in the ruling party," noted Sugeshwara Senadheera, associate director of the Centre for Strategic Studies based in Colombo. The institute deals with research and issues on regional security.

The Sri Lankan writer and analyst has been accused by Tamil rebels of "making a living out of yarns he spins about the LTTE (rebels) for his political masters in the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry," according to a pro-rebel website.

Last week, Gunaratna, who speaks on a wide range of terrorist issues, was quoted on Australian TV on the implications of the Bali bombing. He now lives in Singapore. -- BERNAMA

ldb