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Param `right to quit UN post' (HL)

Cheah Chor Sooi; Koh Lay Chin; Shamini Darshni

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Prominent personalities today came out in support of Datuk N. Parameswaran's decision to quit as chief of staff of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor over racism in the international body.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the explanation of the Malaysian diplomat, who cited racism as one of the reasons he quit, seemed to be justified.

However, Dr Mahathir said he would need to get more details behind Parameswaran's decision to resign from the mission he has been heading since Jan 17, 2000.

When asked by reporters at the Home Ministry's Hari Raya reception at the KDN Complex in Putrajaya whether racism was inherent in various UN missions worldwide, the Prime Minister said: "I don't know yet ... I have to find out".

Parameswaran tendered his resignation through a letter addressed to UN secretary-general Kofi Annan on Dec 21 last year. His resignation which will take effect on Jan 13 is just eight days before the expiry of his contract.

The diplomat had said the staffing composition in his mission had failed to live up to the UN's cherished principle of equitable geographical distribution.

"Untaet has become very much a white mission, an Eastern mission with a Western face. With my resignation, there will effectively be no high-level Asian civilian representation in this mission," he said.

Prof Datuk Khoo Kay Kim, former head of Universiti Malaya's history department, said the very fact that Parameswaran took such a drastic step showed that something was wrong in Untaet.

"I know him well. At one time, he was my student. He's not the kind of person to make impulsive decisions so the situation must have been bad."

He said it was common knowledge among academic circles that "subtle discrimination" happened in many organisations but in Parameswaran's case it must have been "blatant".

"We have never been very comfortable about the United States' stronghold in the UN, but when we sometimes hear about things that go on in the UN, it might not seem so unbelievable.

"This time around, we have someone inside there telling us his first hand experience, so we should take him seriously," he said.

On whether Malaysia should make a formal protest, he said: "It's up to the Government. Sometimes, we don't understand the niceties of international relations so it's best to leave it to them".

International Movement for a Just World president Prof Dr Chandra Muzaffar said the allegations made by Parameswaran should not be ignored.

"There should be a thorough investigation. The allegations of how Parameswaran's authority was undermined by his UN subordinates and the UN authority in East Timor is a serious one," he said.

Former United Nations General Assembly president Tan Sri Razali Ismail said he did not want to comment extensively about the matter as he did not know the full details.

"I do not know what's going on in East Timor, and while I don't disagree with Param I think you cannot make judgments on the UN as a whole, based on what might be happening there," he said.

On the possibility of the UN or Untaet practising racism or a "white policy", he said passing judgment on the UN would be akin to the parable of "blind men and the elephant".

"You can look at the tail, trunk or leg on its own but every aspect is different and may not reflect on the reality or whole situation," he said.

Head of a prominent think-tank, who did not want to be named, said he was not surprised that Parameswaran was angry, but he was surprised Malaysia had agreed to second him to Untaet in the first place.

"Actually, I'm also not shocked by the allegations as the Anglo Saxons think of themselves as the most righteous people around and that they can save the world. They think their way is the right way and that others' are not," he said.

As far back as Jan 8, 2001, a report in the Sydney Morning Herald quoted a Dili-based aid worker as saying the UN mission in East Timor was a "continuing failure" and faced "eventual extinction".

Denis Dragovic spoke of an occasion where he dined with three Dili district administration officers.

"Soon the all-too-frequent conversational contest began - who can denigrate the East Timorese people the most. The comments echoed what I imagine dinner table conversation might have sounded 100 years ago in Australia.

"Of the East Timorese they said - they have an IQ of a dog, well, at least I can train my dog, they don't need electricity because they don't read or wash," he said.

He added that there were very few East Timorese in top district jobs even after a directive requiring UN staff to have them as counterparts for all district administration positions.

"It's no wonder the process of handing over the reins to the Timorese has stalled, considering the attitudes rampant among UN staff.

"For every dollar spent by Untaet on direct assistance to the East Timorese, 10 more are being spent on running its own overheads."
news@nstp.com.my

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