

12 AUG 2003

Sri Lanka-Mahathir

SRI LANKA NEEDS LEADERS LIKE MAHATHIR, SAYS MINISTER

By: Azman Ujang

COLOMBO, Aug 12 (Bernama) -- Sri Lanka needs leaders like Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew whose "fairly tough" leadership has done their countries a lot of good, Commerce and Consumer Affairs Minister Ravi Karunanayake said today.

And he said Sri Lanka certainly needed a complete reorientation of its political system because largely politicking and politicians had done "immeasurable" damage to the country.

"We need leaders like Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew who govern in a fairly tough manner but which is benevolently good for the country," he told a group of visiting Malaysian journalists at his residence here.

He spoke of how the entire country had been mismanaged through wrong political directions.

Karunanayake said the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had brought charges like the minority Tamils were being oppressed and suppressed to justify its existence.

"But my feeling is that the entire country has been oppressed and suppressed. As much as the Tamils say they have been oppressed, the Sinhalese and the Muslims are also oppressed. The majority Sinhalese make up 76 per cent, Tamils 17 per cent and Muslims 7 per cent of the country's 19 million population.

"It is a completely mismanaged country that has resulted in such problems coming out," said the straight-talking minister.

But he said the government under Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesighe which came to power in December 2001 had taken it upon itself to try to change the course of Sri Lanka and to lead the people to a new future.

Only two months after being voted in, Wickremesighe, who he described as a visionary leader, managed to secure the LTTE's agreement to sign a ceasefire to the 20-year civil war, the number one problem the country has been grappling with.

"Now the war has been converted to peace. My feeling is that they (the LTTE) are ready for peace. Through the process there will be turbulent times. We just went through one of those air pockets and probably we will come out and start talking with them in September," he said of the stalled peace talks.

He was confident that an interim administration as part of power-sharing in the country's troubled North and East could be put in place within the next three to four months.

This would lead to a more permanent peaceful resolution to the ethnic conflict in the next two years.

As he put it: "Peace is there. It is how you basically commercialise the process that will basically confirm that peace is established."

Karunanayake said in a country like Sri Lanka, he believed that people would not turn to terrorist activity if they had jobs, salaries and houses to live in.

"Sometimes they have no choice but to join the terrorist movement for their survival," he said.

"What we are doing is we are trying to commercialise the peace process," he said.

Karunanayake's views on terrorism unleashed in Sri Lanka during the war that has claimed 65,000 lives were equally blunt.

"The most important thing now is that terrorists know that they have a very limited lifespan left for them.

"And the LTTE knows this most. They are a ruthless terrorist organisation and the whole world cannot ignore if they renege on this (ceasefire) agreement. Time is running out for terrorism," he said.

Turning to the economy, he said from a negative growth when the present government took over, Sri Lanka's economy had turned around to a positive 4.8 per cent with creating a conducive investment climate given top priority.

With the dawning of peace, it achieved the highest ever single year foreign investment of US\$280 million (RM1.064 billion) last year, up a whopping 160 per cent from a year earlier.

The basic policy is opening up markets through free trade agreements (FTA), the most successful one so far is with India while FTA's with the United States, European Union, Thailand, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Egypt are on the cards.

Karunanayake, who is visiting Malaysia at the end of the month, said he would discuss the possibility of Sri Lanka having a similar FTA with Malaysia in discussions with International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

Citing an example of the benefits of such FTA between the two countries, he said Malaysia's car maker Proton could access the huge neighbouring Indian auto market if it sets up a plant in Sri Lanka.

"Some Japanese car makers are already eyeing Sri Lanka with a view to getting into the Indian market," he said.

-- BERNAMA

AU HS MFJ RM