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Sri Lanka-Conflict

SRI LANKA INTERNAL PROBLEMS MUST BE SETTLED FAST TO ATTRACT AID

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 28 (Bernama) -- Sri Lanka's elected government led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe wants to iron out fast problems with the country's President, Chandrika Kumaratunga, to enable the once war-torn country to receive foreign aid which runs into billions of dollars.

Sri Lanka Foreign Minister Tyronne Fernando said that although the two feuding parties had not set a deadline to resolve the internal political bickering, "it does not mean we can dilly-dally" to resolve the issue.

"We are not the only girl on the beach, there are many girls on the beach," he said, referring to foreign aid promised to the country which experienced a 20-year civil war due to the insurgence of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Fernando was speaking at a media conference prior to his departure following an overnight stopover on his way home from Mauritius and the Seychelles.

He said that the two feuding parties should get their act together but "this might need a little more time."

"We are 90 per cent on the way (to reach an amicable settlement with the LTTE). We have made much progress including making the fathers of suicide bombers (the LTTE were the pioneer of such terror tactics) to sit down and talk. Now they (LTTE) have stopped and we have over the last two years saved over 20,000 lives," he said.

The power struggle between Wickremesinghe and Kumaratunga came to a boil when the President sacked the Defence, Interior and Media Ministers of the Prime Minister's elected government in November, saying that Wickremesinghe had compromised security by conceding too much to the Tigers in his bid to end the war over a separate Tamil state in the island's north and east.

The Prime Minister in return stated that he could not continue to lead the Norwegian-brokered peace process unless he controls security, which falls under the country's Defence Ministry.

In June, foreign nations pledged about US\$4.5 billion in aid at a donor conference in Japan to rebuild Sri Lanka provided there is progress in the government's peace process with the LTTE.

Since the internal problem between the Prime Minister and President erupted, the Norwegian peace brokers have pulled out but the peace pact between the LTTE and the government is so far still intact.

"The LTTE have said that they are not going back to war. They (no doubt) are arming themselves (since the power struggle between the Prime Minister and President broke out) like we are and we can't waste too much time in coming to a solution," Fernando said.

He said that if Kumaratunga wants to retain the country's Defence portfolio, then she must also take over the peace process, which was rejuvenated by Wickremesinghe after coming to power three years ago.

Fernando ruled out a possible election to resolve the dispute between the Prime Minister and President, saying that polls would only "lead to violence and more bloodshed."

"We need to resolve this issue through a scheme of cohabitation. The two major parties need to work together. We need to amend the constitution to give the LTTE what they want and to do that we need a two-thirds majority in Parliament. No one party in Sri Lanka can do that...so naturally we need to work together," he said.

He said that despite all the adverse publicity Sri Lanka had experienced as a result of her internal problems, tourists as well as investors were coming to the country and the main reason for this was the maintenance of peace.

He also said that Malaysia was becoming a major investor in Sri Lanka with numerous projects including the construction of the Candy Highway.

On another note, Fernando, who has been nominated for the post of United Nations Secretary-General to take over from Kofi Annan when his term ends in 2007, said that it was about time that Asia was given an opportunity to take the seat.

"Asia had one (UN Secretary-General) and that was 41 years ago. Africa had three. So we feel Asia must make a strong bid for the position now."

Asked whether former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad would be suitable to represent Asia, he said: "He can, if he is a better diplomat than I."

-- BERNAMA

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