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Sri Lankan Muslims consider Dr M a hero

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BERUWALA, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is widely regarded as a hero by Muslims and others in Sri Lanka, according to local

Muslim community leader Ismail Lebai Shuaib of Dhargatown, about three kilometres from here.

"Dr Mahathir is highly regarded for his non-aligned policies and for his courage in standing up to the West," he said.

Ismail said this when he met Malaysian reporters at the opening of a new mosque in Dhargatown, the country's second largest Muslim township with a population of more than 25,000.

Ismail, 75, is a former principal of Zakira College in Dhargatown.

Dr A.M.M. Iqbal, 62, a trustee of the mosque, said Dr Mahathir had brought a lot of development to Malaysia. "His retirement will be a great loss to the Muslims as well as the region."

Mohamad Ibrahim, 65, expressed the hope that Sri Lanka would produce a leader like Dr Mahathir.

Ismail said 50,000 Muslim refugees wanted to return to their homes in North Sri Lanka. He said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam had forced Muslims to leave their homes within 24 hours.

"However the Sri Lankan Government has generally been fair to us and Muslims living in Sinhalese majority areas face no problems," he said.

"But if Tamils are given autonomy in the north and north-east of the country, Muslims too should be given autonomy."

Ismail conceded that the Tamils had legitimate grievances, especially after independence, when the Tamil language was not given due recognition.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan Defence Minister Tilak Marapana said 40 intelligence operatives attached to the security forces and police had been assassinated by the Tamil Tigers since the ceasefire in February last year.

Marapana claimed that the LTTE military leader in the east Karuna Aminan had reportedly instructed his intelligence officers to continue their attacks on government intelligence officers.