

13/08/2003

Sri Lanka needs 'fairly tough but benevolent leaders'

Shukor Rahman

SRI LANKA needs "fairly tough but benevolent" leaders like Malaysian Prime

Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore Senior Minister Lee

Kuan Yew, says Commerce and Consumer Affairs Minister Ravi Karunanayake.

Speaking to visiting Malaysian journalists at his residence yesterday, Karunanayake said Sri Lanka needed a complete reorientation of her political system.

"It is not just the Tamils who have been oppressed. The Sinhalese and Muslims were also oppressed. The entire country was mismanaged by previous administrations."

Sri Lanka, he said, was heading for peace although the process might pass through turbulent times. He was confident that the proposed Interim Administration for the north and northeast would be realised within three or four months.

Karunanayake said Sri Lanka was now giving heavy weightage to manufacturing and exports.

"For the last 20 years, we have done too little, too late."

He said last year Sri Lanka's foreign investments amounted to US\$280 million (RM1.06 billion), a 100 per cent increase over the previous year.

The Government has created a conducive business climate to attract foreign investors.

"Malaysia is a country we look up to and we would like to emulate some of your success stories," he said.

The Government's objective for the first five years is to create more jobs and an export base for foreign investors to come.

Touching on the ceasefire agreement, Karunanayake said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam knew that time was running out for terrorism.

He said there were now roadblocks everywhere in America. "I guess they have now got the reality of terrorism," he said.

Earlier yesterday Employment and Labour Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe told Malaysian reporters that Sri Lanka was ready to supply Malaysia's labour needs.

"The areas we have identified are construction and factory workers and other skilled areas, even IT if the demand is there," he said.

There were also openings in the plantation sector, but Sri Lankans were

not too keen on such jobs, he said.

Samarasinghe said at present there were about 3,000 Sri Lankans working

in Malaysia and 98 per cent were domestic maids.

About one million Sri Lankans were working overseas with the largest number - 350,000 - in Saudi Arabia.

About 170,000 Sri Lankan workers are in the United Arab Emirates, 160,000 in Kuwait, 80,000 in Lebanon, 50,000 in Jordan while Oman and

Qatar have between 30,000 and 35,000.

"From studies made, I can see a huge potential for mutual benefit for both Malaysia and Sri Lanka."

Sri Lankan workers, he said, had cultivated a good name for themselves by not getting involved in political and domestic issues of their host country.

Sri Lanka, he said, was facing a shortfall in nurses to meet the heavy demands from countries like Canada and was accelerating training courses for nurses and caregivers.

The country is also short of English teachers to meet the needs of rural areas. He said between 12,000 and 13,000 graduates emerged on the job market every year while the country was facing a backlog of 26,000 unemployed graduates.

"The unemployed becomes fodder for extremist parties. The private sector understands this and is fully co-operating with us and providing training to jobless graduates."