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Wickremesinghe: We will continue supplying workers

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said Sri Lanka will continue to supply workers to Malaysia as they are well treated.

"We have our own system of verifying how our workers are treated in foreign countries," he said at a Press conference here.

"Our Department of Labour, Foreign Employment Bureau and the Sri Lankan missions will report to us any incidence of abuse.

"We have not heard of negative reports from Malaysia."

Sri Lanka, he said, had just signed an agreement with the Malaysian Government to supply domestic helpers.

Two weeks ago Malaysia and Sri Lanka signed a memorandum of understanding on the recruitment of workers.

The MoU was signed when Sri Lankan Employment and Labour Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe visited Malaysia.

The MoU was the first between the two countries.

Currently, about 4,000 Sri Lankan workers are employed locally as maids and in the plantation sector.

Wickremesinghe is in Malaysia for a two-day working trip.

Earlier, he called on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Putrajaya.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak and Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu called on him in the morning at a hotel, here.

During his meeting with Dr Mahathir, Wickremesinghe said they discussed ways to improve co-operation between the two countries.

Wickremesinghe said he was seeking Malaysian investments in infrastructure, tourism, and agriculture, assuring investors that the country was moving towards peace.

"I also want to place on record that I am happy that Dr Mahathir had provided us with much assistance during our difficult times.

"I also briefed Dr Mahathir on the peace process taking place in Sri Lanka."

He said the peace process was progressing well.

"The Sri Lankan Government is waiting for the proposal from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Once we have received it we will decide on how the discussions should be conducted," he said.

"The proposal is expected to be submitted in September but I am not sure if talks will begin this month or later."

Nevertheless, he said, the negotiation was going to be a tough one.

"The issues that we are going to talk are long-standing issues and cannot be solved overnight," he added.

Asked if he would meet LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran to solve the problem, Wickremesinghe said: "I don't think a face-to-face meeting will solve anything.

"But as we go along and if and when such an occasion is needed, we can consider it."

The Sri Lankan Government and separatist Tamil Tigers signed a ceasefire in February 2002 and are now trying to find a political solution to end a conflict that has killed 65,000 people and displaced 800,000 Tamils during the past two decades.

After initial success, the talks stalled in April. Rebel representatives have refused to restart negotiations until they get guarantees from the

government that they will have wide-ranging political power in a proposed interim administration.

Wickremesinghe said the talks were going to be tough because they were dealing with issues that were going to determine the outcome of future political negotiations.

He said he would not be surprised if there were one or two more breakdowns before things moved forward.