

# Pandithan: I want to be Samy's friend

KUALA LUMPUR: After some 20 years, ailing Indian Progressive Front (IPF) president Datuk M.G. Pandithan wants to make peace with his political rival MIC president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, but ruled out any merger plans with the party.

"Enough is enough, it has been more than 20 years, I don't want to have any enmity with him (Samy Vellu). Bad blood between the two of us is not good. I want to be a friend," Bernama reported Pandithan as telling reporters yesterday. Pandithan had kept his distance from the media for months due to a prolonged illness.

"We should join forces to fight for the Indian community. Twenty years of fighting is too long (between both leaders)," said Pandithan, 66.

The strained relations between both leaders appeared to have thawed after Samy Vellu paid a surprise visit in June to his long-time foe at the Kuala Lumpur Hospital, where Pandithan was recuperating from lung problems.

However, the frail looking Pandithan clad in party colours - red shirt and black pants - dispelled talks of reuniting with MIC where he started his political career and rose to become the party's vice president until he was sacked in 1989 for indiscipline.

"But don't misconstrue, I am not joining MIC. I will not join MIC and Samy will not join IPF," he said, adding that IPF members who wished to leave the party could do so and as the president he would not stop such moves.

The rivalry between them had run deep since his sacking. Following that, Pandithan went on to form the IPF, which he says has nearly 380,000 members with 80 divisions.

At the hour-long press conference and with a surgical mask dangling under his chin, Pandithan refused to answer questions on his health or to say why he was having the mask on. With him was his wife Datin Jayasree.

He went on to say that IPF was still intact and that the party elections, slated for this Novem-

ber, would be held after the general election.

Asked whether he would name a successor to take over the reins from him as he had been ill for some time, Pandithan refused to name any one and said there were many who could take over but lacked the necessary experience.

However, he named two senior IPF members to manage the party - secretary general V. Senguttuan to handle administration and K. Murugiah to take charge of disciplinary matters.

"It will be low profile for me, at an advisory level," he said.

On a question whether IPF, which had evolved under his shadow, would collapse if he were not the president, he said it was unlikely.

He said that the IPF was built on "blood, sweat and tears" and would not founder that easily.

Later, Samy Vellu was reported to have said that he and Pandithan were old friends.

"This opens a new chapter for the betterment of the Indian community," he added.