



TODAY FILE PHOTO

'I'm a loving critic of the West'

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HE WAS blasted for being "anti American" in a review of his book. Yet, when Professor Kishore Mahbubani (picture) asked his publisher in Turkey when the book would be published, he was told it was "pro-American".

Speaking last night at the Harvard Club of Singapore's Annual Dinner, the former diplomat and ambassador to the United Nations said this showed how sensitive the western world had become to criticism. While he admits to being "more critical than most people", Prof Mahbubani declared himself a "loving critic of the West".

"I want the West to succeed. Unfortunately, because I cut so close to the bone of some of my points, I am now considered anti-Western," said the Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Speaking on the topic "Why the world lacks global leadership", Professor Mahbubani was asked by a member of the audience about his views of US President-elect Barack Obama. Prof Mahbubani said Mr Obama's election was "hugely positive" and had reduced anti American feelings around the world "by 50 per cent almost immediately".

Mr Obama has "a honeymoon period of four to six months ... But after that, he will be judged not on his personality but

his policies," he added.

Among the "difficult challenges" include the Israel and Palestine conflict, and the security situations in Iraq and Afghanistan, said Prof Mahbubani. He warned that political gridlock could prevent solutions from being reached.

"Unless he can bring the same magic to his policies and lead to a real change in policies, then we can see some hope," said Prof Mahbubani. "But given his immediate challenges such as the financial crisis and enormous domestic problems, he is not going to touch foreign policy. And in a year from now, you will see the same problems coming back."

"I want to be optimistic but analytically, I cannot be optimistic."

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AGEING NEEDS

Bring the 'many helping hands' together

NMP urges better coordination among agencies serving the elderly

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HE MIGHT be poor and on public assistance, but asked if he would rather age somewhere else, the elderly Indian man replied: "The Government is like my father. If I die alone, I know the Government will take care of my body and take care of my funeral."

This, said Nominated Member of Parliament Kalyani Mehta, reflected the faith older Singaporeans had in the Government. But was the Government meeting their expectations?

Even with recent initiatives such as the Ministerial Committee on Ageing, there was still a need to better bring together and deliver assistance and services for the elderly, said Associate Professor Mehta, who spoke on issues affecting the elderly in Parliament yesterday.

Referring to the "Many Helping Hands" approach by the Government, she said: "The delivery of services is fragmented, piece meal and not easy to navigate by end-users ... There's an urgent need to standardise and centralise the services so that the public can use them without experiencing the 'passing-the-parcel' syndrome."

In addition, she pointed out that there was inconsistency in the means-testing formula used by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, and should be streamlined.

"For example, someone who is eligible for financial assistance at a day rehab centre, when he's moved to the social day care centre, may suddenly find that he has no more financial aid," she said.

MORE WAYS TO HELP THE NEEDY ELDERLY: ASSOC PROF MEHTA

Seniors' Pocket Money Fund

- For the medical and daily needs of those above 70
- Government can provide start-up fund; thereafter, to be funded by donations
- Ensure application process is user-friendly

Social and health services for those with dementia

- More day-care centres for the elderly with dementia
- More custom-built residential institutions needed in future
- Better quality care for residents in such institutions

A national institution focusing on policies, practices and research for the elderly could be set up to "maximise resources and avoid duplication", said Assoc Prof Mehta, pointing out that this recommendation had also been made in 1989.

Also, a national registry for this vulnerable group living alone or childless, should be created to ensure that targeted assistance — such as food delivery and health care — could be more efficiently administered.

Mr Lim Boon Heng, who is the Minister in charge of ageing issues, agreed that there was a need to be more "people-centred" in the "Many Helping Hands" approach.

A centre for information and referral is being "actively studied", said Mr Lim and organisations offering services to the elderly should not be too narrowly focused. Diversifying could be more cost efficient, he added. He also pointed out that the high cost of home-care services for the elderly could be reduced if the existing services could be consolidated.

On Assoc Prof Mehta's call for a caregivers' allowance and the creation of family care leave, Mr Lim said that such an allowance was being "studied seriously", but the question remained as to who should provide this allowance. Also, one had to be "careful" in paying for what is traditionally the duty of the family, he added.

While Mr Lim did not rule out family care leave, the impact on employers should be considered. "It's something we should not rush into," he said.

As for a national registry for the elderly, Mr Lim said the Government's Wellness Programme could carry this out with the Community Development Councils. In fact, some of the Wellness Programme's pilot sites were already doing so.

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