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LEAD Malaysia-Thai
MALAYSIA TO FREE 39 THAI PRISONERS

KUALA LUMPUR, May 30 (Bernama) -- Malaysia will release 39 Thais imprisoned in the country as a gesture of goodwill on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Thailand's King Bhumipol Aduladej's ascension to the throne.

The decision was conveyed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to his visiting Thai counterpart Banharn Silpa-Archa during their bilateral talks at the Prime Minister's Department today.

Briefing reporters on the talks, Foreign Ministry Deputy Secretary-General (I) Datuk Abdul Halim Ali said the prisoners, who include fishermen, will be released on June 1, the day Malaysia celebrates the birthday of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

He said the Thai prisoners were selected from various prisons based on the merit of their cases and they will be pardoned by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the respective heads of state.

"They will be released as a sign of goodwill and to mark this very special occasion," he said.

Halim said the release of the prisoners, who include several women, was recommended by the Pardon Board of the states concerned.

He said they will be transferred to the border town of Rantau Panjang in Kelantan from where they will be allowed to cross the border into Thailand.

"This is the first time the (Malaysian) government has made such a decision (to release prisoners who are foreigners)," he said.

Asked if Malaysia had requested for anything in return for their release, Halim said: "No, we didn't do that ... This is a gesture on our part. It's a unilateral gesture to mark this very special occasion."

He said Banharn, who arrived here yesterday for a two-day official visit, welcomed their release.

Halim also said the government will look into the request by the Thai government for an early release of some 350 Thai prisoners in Malaysia.

He said the two prime ministers also agreed that the problems arising from the border demarcation exercise should be resolved.

They agreed that although the survey of the Malaysian-Thai border was completed, there were still a few small areas in Bukit Jeli in Kelantan which have yet to be agreed upon.

"The two prime ministers agreed the problem should be overcome urgently and that officials will undertake a study immediately to achieve a final settlement," he said.

Halim said Dr Mahathir and Banharn did not discuss the construction by Malaysia of a security wall along the border of the two countries. The wall is nearing completion.

The two leaders also reviewed the progress of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) and concluded that cooperation within the IMT-GT needed a little push by both countries to speed up its implementation.

"In this respect, the two prime ministers agreed that their countries should facilitate cross border transport and communications," he said, adding that Malaysia is prepared to study Thailand's proposal that the border checkpoint opening time be extended by several hours.

On the proposed "land bridge" linking Pulau Pinang and Songkhla in Thailand, he said Dr Mahathir told Banharn that it would facilitate

transportation of goods and also ease the traffic congestion in the Straits of Melaka.

Halim said the Thai government welcomed the proposal to be undertaken by the private sector. "The private companies involved have been told to speed up their study on the feasibility of the project," he added.

In fishery cooperation, Dr Mahathir told Banharn that Malaysia is willing to consider joint-ventures between Malaysian and Thai companies.

Halim said Malaysia is also willing to consider a Thai request to recruit Thais to work in certain sectors in Malaysia, such as plantations.

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