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Thai-Release
PARDONED 44 THAI PRISONERS LEAVE FOR HOME

RANTAU PANJANG, June 1 (Bernama) -- Forty-four Thai nationals who had been held in various prisons in the country crossed the "Goodwill Bridge" (Jambatan Muhibbah) here today for their return home after Malaysia agreed to free them as a gesture of goodwill with the neighbouring country.

At a simple but meaningful ceremony on the bridge, Narathiwat Governor, Sawat Krittratchatanan thanked Malaysia for the goodwill gesture and advised the pardoned prisoners to set a new life back home.

"This is a good sign of cooperation between Malaysia and Thailand...in many ways we have cooperated closely," he told reporters. Malaysian immigration and prisons officials were present.

Incidentally, the 23-year-old bridge, connecting this border town on the Malaysian side with Sungai Golok on the Thai side, is itself symbolic of the close ties that exist between the peoples and governments of the two countries.

Sawat said the freed prisoners, including two women, could go back to their families and find some decent jobs like farming or fishing.

"I would like them to have a good profession and not go against the law," he said.

Even as he spoke, some of the prisoners were seen hugging their family members, most of whom were in tears.

The 44 prisoners released today was five more than the number that had been announced earlier. They had been jailed for various offences including encroachment into Malaysian waters to fish, dadah and immigration-related cases.

Foreign Ministry Deputy Secretary-General Datuk Abdul Halim Ali had announced on Thursday that Malaysia would be releasing 39 Thai prisoners as a goodwill gesture on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of King Bhumipol Adulyadej's ascension to the throne.

Today's event coincided with the birthday of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar.

The freed prisoners, who had served out most of their sentences, were brought here in three buses from the Pengkalan Chepa prison, near Kota Baharu.

They had arrived in Kelantan yesterday from the prisons in Pulau Pinang, Alor Setar, Taiping, Simpang Renggam, Muar, Kajang, Pernu and Marang, a Malaysian prison official said.

Following talks between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his visiting Thai counterpart Banharn Silpa-Archa in Kuala Lumpur, Halim had said that the Thai prisoners were selected from various prisons based on the merits of their cases. They have been pardoned by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the respective heads of State.

Halim said it was the first time that Malaysia has made such a move and Banharn had welcomed the gesture of friendship.

King Bhumipol, the world's longest reigning monarch, will celebrate the anniversary on June 6. -- BERNAMA

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