

02 MAR 1996

Mahathir-wall

WALL WELL WITHIN MALAYSIAN SIDE, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

By: Ahamd Zukiman Zain and KC Leong

BANGKOK, March 2 (Bernama) -- The wall being constructed by Malaysia near the border with Thailand to block illegal immigrants and smuggling activities is located well within Malaysian territory and not right at the common border.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mahamad said today he had explained this aspect to his Thai counterpart Banharn Silpa-archa when they met on the sidelines of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) here this morning.

The wall was built inside Malaysia and some distance away from the actual surveyed border simply because the space was needed for the Malaysian authorities to inspect the condition on both sides of the wall without ever infringing on Thai territory.

"I think Thailand understands the need for Malaysia to build such a wall which is to stop illegal immigrants from coming into Malaysia and the smuggling of drugs and other goods," he said.

He clarified that the illegal immigrants were in fact not Thais but nationals of countries bordering Thailand who merely transitted Thai territory before entering Malaysia illegally.

Dr Mahathir explained that Malaysia and Thailand shared a long border, long parts of which run through thick jungles, making it impossible for either side to mount constant patrols.

He said it had been a very cordial meeting with Banharn as there were no serious bilateral problems.

Referring to the fishing issue, which had been a source of irritations in Bangkok-Kuala Lumpur relations because of encroachment of Thai fishermen into Malaysian waters, Dr Mahathir said this matter was now settled.

"In fact Malaysia welcomed Thai participation in our fishing industry except that we want the fish to be landed in Malaysia."

He explained that previously the catch had been landed in Southern Thailand and he did not fault Thailand for this because previously landing facilities in Malaysia had been inadequate.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia and Thailand had agreed that some amnesty could be considered for certain Thais being held in Malaysian prisons for ordinary crimes and not political ones.

It is understood that many Thai fishermen when arrested for fishing illegally in Malaysian waters are unable to pay fines imposed by the courts and end up serving jail terms. -- BERNAMA

AZZ LKC AAM