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Pledge to improve communication links

MALAYSIA and Thailand pledged to improve communication links between the two countries and with other Asean nations and to proceed with plans to build a land bridge from Penang to Songkhla.

As the Asean-10 idea gets closer to realisation with the inclusion of Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia as members, Malaysia and Thailand will spearhead a programme to assist the economic development of the three new members.

This was among the issues discussed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his visiting counterpart from Thailand, General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, during a two-hour delegation meeting at the Prime Minister's office in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the land bridge project, which was proposed by Dr Mahathir in 1996, was perceived by Chavalit as the best tool to not only improve ties between Malaysia and Thailand, but also to bring about prosperity to Asean, and China.

"The land bridge will consist of the construction of roads, railway tracks and a gas pipeline." In this regard, Dr Mahathir told Chavalit that Malaysia will pursue the matter with Petronas.

He said the transport link will facilitate the flow of goods and commodities within Asean. For instance, trading can be done smoothly from Singapore to Malaysia, and Malaysia to Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

Saying that both governments should look into the legal and procedure aspects of the project, Thailand has also proposed another land bridge from Patani, identical to the one being proposed by Malaysia.

Abdullah said both leaders have agreed to find ways to improve bilateral relations, with hopes of increased trade and investments between the two countries.

For this the two sides agreed to form a joint committee on trade and a joint business council, and to reactivate the present joint agricultural committee to fulfill its objective.

"These two committees will enhance the trade volume between the two nations. Apart from that, it will encourage more counter investments from private sector of both sides," he said.

Malaysia and Thailand also agreed that a 15-year-old border demarcation problem between the countries should be resolved within the next two months.

The two leaders outlined two principles to be used in solving the problem. The first is to establish a permanent border which will not be changed due to the shifting nature of the geographical location of a river because of flooding.

The second principle is to take a joint development approach so that any disputed areas along the border would be developed together for mutual benefits based on a win-win situation.

Abdullah said the demarcation problem arose mainly because both countries used rivers as border marks and this posed a problem because the rivers' courses keep changing as a result of flooding.

Consequently, the common border in future will stick to the permanent border mark although there might be further changes in the location of a river.

When there is a need for some compensation to be paid resulting in the exchange of certain places between both sides, details will have to be worked out.

Dr Mahathir also spoke about the developments in the Joint Development Area Authority, which he said can be improved by undertaking more projects for mutual benefit.

"The Prime Minister (Dr Mahathir) has also proposed the development of a deep water port between north of Penang and south of Songkhla to facilitate the flow of goods between the two countries. This has attracted much interest from the Thais," Abdullah said.

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