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Seeking closer co-operation with Thais to curb inflow of illegals

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Malaysia wants closer co-operation with Thailand to curb the inflow of illegal immigrants through the common border.

The subject is expected to be discussed between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Thai counterpart General Tan Sri Chavalit Yongchaiyudh who arrives here tomorrow on a two-day visit.

Foreign Ministry Undersecretary for Southeast Asia and South Pacific Division Mohd Arshad M. Hussain said although co-operation between the two countries had been good, the subject was expected to be discussed between the two Prime Ministers and their delegations to ensure more stringent enforcement.

"Malaysia will request Thailand to render the necessary assistance to our authorities to control the inflow of immigrants," he said.

Last month, following Malaysia's complaint over the large number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar crossing into Malaysia through the common border with Thailand, Thai authorities detained 270 illegal immigrants in southern Thailand.

Malaysian immigration authorities have also intensified enforcement activities near the border.

During the discussions between the two delegations tomorrow, further steps to stop such activities and ways to widen enforcement are expected to be discussed.

Another issue expected to be on the agenda is problems faced in demarcating the border. Although the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 is relied upon for the demarcation of the border, there have been technical problems as to where the markers are to be placed in some areas.

Asked to comment on the issue, Arshad said, it was merely a technical problem and not a territorial dispute as some quarters had claimed.

"There are some problems in interpreting where the pillars are to be placed and discussions on the issue are continuing," he said, adding that the Foreign Ministry secretary-generals of both countries had discussed the issue earlier this month.

Describing Malaysia-Thailand relations as "very close", Arshad said the agreement to jointly explore oil and gas off the shores of the two countries was symbolic of how the two countries had been able to turn a potential conflict into a mutually beneficial project.

"There are no major problems facing the two countries. The visit by the Thai Prime Minister will help further strengthen relations and co-operation between the two countries."

Chavalit, who became Prime Minister in December, will arrive tomorrow accompanied by his wife, Puan Sri Phankruea, and a 42-member delegation comprising senior government officials.

The couple will be granted an audience by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Najihah.

Chavalit will then hold discussions with Dr Mahathir on bilateral and regional matters before the delegations of both countries meet.

On Friday, he will meet representatives of the Malaysian private sector to discuss investment opportunities in Thailand.

Tomorrow's discussions, it is learnt, will centre on the formation of a trade committee between the two countries to look into the quick removal of tariff restrictions on products from both countries to further liberalise trade.

Malaysia is also expected to request Thailand to allow its commercial vehicles to pass through Thailand to destinations in Indochina. Malaysia already allows Thai vehicles carrying perishable items to head for Singapore via Malaysia.

Chavalit, who also holds the defence portfolio, is expected to call for closer defence co-operation between the two countries including more joint exercises involving the army, air force and navy.

The supply of natural gas to Thailand from Malaysia, scheduled to begin in 2000, is also expected to be on the agenda especially since Thailand has asked for a lower price for the gas that is to be piped to its southern region.

Although the encroachment of Thai fishing vessels into Malaysian waters has been reduced by about 50 per cent compared to the 1991/92 period, it still constitutes a problem which the Malaysian authorities would like to be addressed quickly.

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