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It's Thailand that has been appointed deputy commander

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TUARAN, Sat. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today confirmed that it was Thailand, and not Malaysia, which had been appointed deputy commander of the United Nations multinational force to troubled East Timor.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia "would not fight" over the matter and was prepared to accept Thailand's appointment to the post.

He said Malaysia would initially deploy 30 officers and men to East Timor.

"More will be sent when the peacekeeping force has been formed," he told a Press conference at the end of his overnight visit to Sabah.

Dr Mahathir was asked whether it was Malaysia or Thailand which had been appointed.

In a statement yesterday, Defence Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha had said a Malaysian brigadier-general had been appointed deputy commander of an 8,000-strong UN multinational force to East Timor (Interfet). According to Abang Abu Bakar, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had telephoned Dr Mahathir on Thursday to inform him of the appointment.

Dr Mahathir today confirmed that Annan had contacted him to say that Thailand would be appointed to the deputy commander's post.

Meanwhile, armed forces chief Jen Tan Sri Mohd Zahidi Zainuddin said Brig-Jen Datuk Mohd Khalid Saad would lead the 30-man Malaysian team.

Mohd Khalid is commander of the army's First Division's Fifth Infantry Brigade based in Lok Kawi, Sabah.

Mohd Zahidi said the Malaysian team was ready to face any eventuality in East Timor, thanks to experience gained in past UN peacekeeping deployments in Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Cambodia.

"However, we view the situation in Dili as critical and very sensitive compared with the previous peacekeeping deployments," said Mohd Zahidi.

He said the deployment of Malaysian troops for the next phase would constitute a battalion of between 800 and 1,500 men.

"We are making preparations for this, including deploying mechanised units. The strength of the machinery and armoury to be deployed will depend on the situation in East Timor," he added.

Interfet, to be commanded by Australian Major-General Peter Cosgrove, is scheduled to be deployed from Monday to try to restore order in the wake of the pro-Indonesia militia carnage that greeted the Aug 30 independence vote in the former Portuguese colony.

Interfet will initially comprise troops spearheaded by some 2,000 Australians and 250 British gurkhas, who arrived in Darwin, Australia, yesterday.

Singapore will provide a 250-strong medical unit, military observers, logistic support and a pair of landing ships tank (LST).

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