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Thai-Malaysia gas pipeline project will go on: Thaksin

THE 364-km gas pipeline project linking northern Malaysia and southern Thailand will go on as planned as it will benefit both countries and its neighbours, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said.

Despite some hiccups which could delay its implementation, he said both governments had agreed to put up concerted efforts in ensuring the 30 billion baht (100 baht=RM8.53) project materialises.

"We (Thaksin and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) did discuss the pipeline issue, among other things.

"We agreed that the project should take off in our bilateral context. We share the same view regarding the matter as it will bring a lot of benefits to both our countries.

"Both governments will also work together to speed up the implementation of the pipeline project as being agreed upon under the offshore Malaysia-Thailand Joint Development Area," he told reporters in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The gas pipeline project, which was agreed upon by both governments in 1996, was met with contention from some parties in Thailand, notably the opposition and the people living along the pipeline path.

Even environmental groups and non-governmental organisations argued the project as being not environmental friendly and of high risk.

However, Thaksin said his Government is committed to ensure the success of the project, and that "we will honour every contract with any country, including Malaysia".

As to how soon the project - which was supposed to start in 1999 - will be implemented, the premier said they were still waiting for results of the environmental study.

"Of course, we want it to kick off. We are just waiting for the Environment Impact Assessment approval ... and I think it will come very soon. There is also a survey on the people staying along the project ... and we want the people to understand that the project is not harmful," he said.

Meanwhile, Thaksin said he was given an assurance by Malaysia that the country will not allow separatist militants, suspected of bomb attacks in southern Thailand earlier this month, to operate from its territory.

The assurance was given to him during his two-hour meeting with Dr Mahathir in Putrajaya.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar had earlier reiterated that Malaysia was not involved in such activities and instead, will cooperate with Thai security forces to overcome such problems.

Several bombs exploded in Muslim-dominated southern Thai towns early this month, causing the death of a child and injuring dozens of people.

Thai security officers blamed the attack on Muslim separatists.

Thaksin said last week Thai police would send a list of up to 80 suspected separatist guerrillas to the Malaysian police, and hoped they would be arrested and sent for trial in Thailand.

"The problem now is dual citizenship. We know some Thai citizens are residing in Malaysia but this is not a major problem. There are not many bandits left.

"The cooperation with Malaysian security forces is very close ... and I believe both are at the best level of cooperation to avoid any untoward incidents along our common border," he said.

As to whether Thailand will seek Malaysia's assistance in investigating the bombings, Thaksin said: "It is not too serious. There is a long history at our border ... but our close cooperation will solve it. Sometimes it is not related to Muslim or Malaysian citizens.

"Anyway, we had never accused Malaysian involvement in those incidents. What we are doing now is to ascertain who was behind it."

To another question why he chose Malaysia as the first country to visit, he said Malaysia "is Thailand's immediate neighbour ... and there are a lot of common issues in our two-way relations".

Thaksin, accompanied by a 71-member delegation of ministers, officials and journalists, was in Malaysia for an official one-day visit.

He was accompanied by one of his deputy premiers, Pitak Intharavittayanan, Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai, Commerce Minister Adisai Bhotharamik, Finance Minister Somkid Jatusripitak, Interior Minister Purachai Piemsomboon, and Deputy Defence Minister Yuthasak Sasiprapa.

Earlier in the day, he visited Cyberjaya and later met with Thai business leaders in the capital city.

He leaves for Vietnam this morning.

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