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Malaysian-Thai gas pipeline project to go ahead despite protests

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THE Malaysia-Thailand Gas Pipeline project started in 1979 will go on despite protests by some Thai residents.

"Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had assured Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Malaysian-Thai Cabinet meeting on Saturday that the pipeline's construction will not be dropped despite the opposition," the Thai PM's public relations division spokesman told the New Straits Times yesterday.

He said the Thai PM had told the local Press here that "Dr Mahathir trusted Thailand to push the project ahead".

Thaksin had said the pipeline project had full government support and was now left to Thailand's PTT Plc and Malaysia's Petronas to complete it.

Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu told reporters that Thai Deputy Prime Minister Suwit Khunkitti had also assured the Malaysian Cabinet the project would go on as promised.

The proposed 352km pipeline is a US\$689.8 million (RM2.62 billion) joint-venture project to explore "25 years of high reserve" natural gas in a Joint Development Area covering 7,520sq km, about 150km from Kota Baru in Kelantan and 180km from Pattani in south Thailand.

The gas from the Gulf of Thailand will then be piped through two villages in Chana district in Songkhla province to Changlun in Kedah.

In October, out-going PTT director Apisit Rujikeat-Kamjorn told the local dailies that the project would be operational in January 2005 and construction would begin in February 2003.

Last Friday, about 1,000 protesters clashed with the police near Dusit JB Hotel.

Thai national police chief General Sant Sarutanond said 20 policemen and 24 protesters were injured while 12 protest leaders were detained at a border patrol police camp in Songkhla.

Thai Interior Minister Wan Muhamad Noor Matha said the court would decide whether to release those detained.

Meanwhile, the Thai Human Rights Commission had called for an independent panel to investigate the Friday night incident.