

22 DEC 2002

Meeting-Mahathir

DR M ARRIVES FOR RETREAT MEETING WITH THAI CABINET

From Mohd Fisol Jaafar

HAADYAI, Dec 22 (Bernama) - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, leading a delegation of ministers and senior officials, arrived here today for a half-day informal meeting with his Thai counterpart Thaksin Shinawatra and other cabinet members to iron out longstanding issues and discuss plans of common interests.

Dr Mahathir was greeted on arrival at the JB Hotel here -- the venue of the meeting -- by Thaksin at 11.10am (Thai time). The Malaysian delegation had taken a one-hour drive from the Sadao-Bukit Kayu Hitam border checkpoint, 56km south of here, where Thai Foreign Minister Dr Surakiart Sathirathai was on hand to receive them.

Officials said the meeting was expected to focus on bilateral issues, cross-border matters and economic strategies.

Upon arrival in Haadyai, Dr Mahathir and Thaksin delivered brief opening remarks and adjourned for a four-eye meeting before joining their ministers for a working lunch meeting.

Officials said although there was no agenda for the Cabinet retreat meeting, the two governments were expected to focus their talks on how to maintain peace along the Thai-Malaysian common border and happiness for the people of both countries.

Other topics for discussion are cross-border relations, terrorism and economic matters, in particular the Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline project, which faces strong objection from Thai villagers and environmentalists who claim that the project would pollute villages and fishing grounds.

Both governments have said the US\$700 million (RM2.66 billion) project would bring jobs to the region and help supply gas to the Malaysian peninsula.

It involves the laying of a 366km-long pipeline from the Gulf of Thailand to Malaysia.

On Friday, some 1,000 people demonstrated outside the JB Hotel in central Haadyai, urging the government to scrap the project. The police were forced to act when the crowd became unruly.

Yesterday, Thai Energy Minister Phongthep Thepkhanjana said the Thai government was ready to listen to public opinions on the project, although in implementing the project it would be impossible for the government to satisfy everybody.

-- BERNAMA

MFJ AZH RV YBY