

22/12/2002

Dr Mahathir and Cabinet reciprocate with Haadyai visit

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IN Malaysia, it is customary for neighbours to reciprocate visits to each other's open house during the festive season. So, too, for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who leads a delegation of Cabinet Ministers and officials to Haadyai today.

Apart from holding meetings with his Thai counterpart Thaksin Shinawatra and Cabinet, Dr Mahathir and the Malaysian delegation will be in the southern Thai town to return a visit by the Thai leadership.

Thaksin and his ministers had attended the National Hari Raya Aidilfitri Open House in Jitra yesterday.

Such gestures will go a long way in strengthening ties between two neighbouring countries which have numerous common interests.

Two meetings have been scheduled between the leaderships at the JB Hotel Haadyai.

While Dr Mahathir and Thaksin will conduct a one-to-one meeting at noon, the Cabinet members of both countries will hold talks.

Security, post-Sept 11, is one of the many things to be discussed.

Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia forged a Southeast Asian anti-terrorism pact in May.

The pact focuses on sharing intelligence, resources and personnel to fight terrorism.

Cambodia and Thailand have since joined. Singapore, meanwhile, has bilateral security arrangement with Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia.

The security co-operation between Malaysia and Thailand, which has always been good, shifted into top gear last month following the visit by Thai Interior Minister Wan Muhamad Noor Matha to Putrajaya.

His meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi resulted in an agreement to foster closer co-operation on border security and law enforcement to eradicate smuggling and apprehend criminals.

Despite alarmist reports about the Malaysia-Thai border area being a "haven" for terror groups, both countries can rely on their long history of successfully combating terror activities in their joint border areas to make such a security pact effective.

Thailand has been successful in warding off attempts at creating a militant struggle by various groups, including the Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO) and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Pattani (BRNP).

Similarly, Malaysia has a wealth of experience in dealing with the Communist Party of Malaya since 1948, a struggle won by the authorities when the Communists laid down their arms on Dec 2, 1989.

Apart from security, Malaysia and Thailand also have many joint economic interests to be discussed during the meeting.

Among them is the gas pipeline project between the two countries.

The 352km long pipeline is part of a US\$1.5 billion (RM5.7 billion) joint venture to exploit an offshore gas field in the Gulf of Thailand.

The proposed pipeline is slated to pass through five villages on the Thai coast, 950km south of Bangkok. A gas separation plant and an adjacent 20,000-hectare industrial zone would also be built in the area.

The project grabbed Thai public attention due to objections by various local communities and environmental groups. These objections have delayed the project for more than a year.

It is hoped the meeting between the country's top leadership will provide the impetus for the project to remain on course until completion.

The determination of the Thai Government is evident. Thaksin in July stated his Government's determination to see the project come to fruition.

Another project which will step up a gear is the sharing of power supply between Tenaga Nasional Bhd (TNB) and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (Egat).

An agreement on the project which was signed yesterday was one of the highlights of Thaksin's visit to Kedah.

The project allows power supply to be traded between TNB and Egat, and allows the two power producers to share electricity supply during system emergencies or incidence of shortages. It paves the way for an ambitious undertaking to create a fully interconnected Asean Transmission power grid.

Ties between the peoples of Malaysia and Thailand have traditionally been strong. Many Malaysians living in the border States, for example, have bloodlines that can be traced to communities across the border.

It leads to a delightful situation for the visiting Malaysian, who discovers many among his hosts in southern Thailand speaking fluent Malay and practising the Malay culture.

Likewise, it is hoped that the Thais who came to the National Hari Raya Aidilfitri open house last night were equally delighted to find among the guests, members of the Thai community of this country, as well as Malaysians of all races who mingled in an atmosphere of neighbourliness.