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Good neighbours

THERE are perhaps few places in the world where the friendship between two neighbouring countries is expressed in the affectionate way that Malaysia and Thailand showed over the weekend.

Not only did Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad meet his Thai counterpart Thaksin Shinawatra, but members of the two Cabinets met as well for informal talks in Haadyai. This is an event that must be unique in the often turgid arena of diplomacy and international relations.

Ordinary Malaysians and Thais emulated the warm family-like gathering of their political leaders when they got together in the thousands to celebrate Hari Raya Aidilfitri in Jitra. The national Hari Raya open house became, delightfully, an "international" open house with the presence of the Thai Prime Minister, his Cabinet members and the many Thai guests.

Despite the informal atmosphere, substantive matters were dealt with in the talks, including a power agreement, the gas pipeline project and co-operation against terrorism.

Malaysia and Thailand are true neighbours whose bond goes beyond sharing a boundary. The friendship between the governments and peoples of the two countries is based on shared interests, and a spirit of give and take.

In a world where there is strife and religious conflict between nations and communities because of suspicion and intolerance, the close ties between Muslim-majority Malaysia and mainly-Buddhist Thailand can serve as an example to others.