

20/12/2002

Thais promise PM a memorable Raya

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KANGAR, Thurs. - Several Thai officials today pledged to make this Saturday's National Hari Raya Open House gathering "a very memorable one" for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Thai Ambassador to Malaysia Chaisiri Anamarn said the Thai Cabinet, led by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, together with senior government officials and governors of the country's five southern provinces will join the celebrations.

"We have been invited. As true neighbours of diplomacy, we are coming in full force to ensure a very memorable and meaningful gathering for Dr Mahathir as this is his last Hari Raya Open House in his capacity as Prime Minister," Chaisiri told the New Straits Times when contacted at his Kuala Lumpur office today.

He said the location, in Dr Mahathir's parliamentary constituency of Kubang Pasu bordering Thailand, added "more significance to the invitation".

"Dr Mahathir's proven track record speaks for itself. He is a model of dynamism and vision to be emulated by Asean leaders," said Chaisiri.

"It is also for the first time the full Cabinet of both countries will be discussing simultaneously issues pertaining to each respective ministry."

Chaisiri expressed hope the inaugural full Cabinet meeting of both countries would pave the way to resolving unsettled issues on both sides of the border.

Consul-General of Thailand in Penang, Suwit Saicheua said it was Malaysia under Dr Mahathir's leadership which brought peace and security along the Thai-Malaysia border in December 1989.

The once troubled border areas are set to generate socio-economic activities beneficial to both neighbours.

In Songkhla province of south Thailand, Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) Southern Region 1 director Pasakorn Supannapan described the invitation and the two Prime Ministers' visits as a catalyst to cross-border tourism.

"Besides strengthening relations, the meeting of two heads of neighbouring countries near the common border will further highlight the various tourist attractions on both sides of the border," said Pasakorn.

Songkhla district police chief Police Colonel Veerasit Phetkhai said it was Thais' understanding of the friendly neighbour that warranted a "really good support" for Dr Mahathir's last Hari Raya gathering.

"The two PMs' visit near the border will also boost border security and intelligence networking," said Veerasit.

Sadao district police chief Surin Palarae and Customs chief Sombat Uwtapow contended the Hari Raya invitation and the two PMs' visit would help dispel the notion that the border region was dangerous and a high-risk area.

"Border security had been stepped up and there is no cause for fear," said Surin.

Sombat said people and vehicles crossing the border were already undergoing stringent checks by Customs officials.