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Mahathir-Retreat

THAI-MALAYSIAN CABINET RETREAT UNIQUE, PRODUCTIVE, SAYS MAHATHIR

From Mohd Fisol Jaafar

HAADYAI, Dec 22 (Bernama) -- The Thai-Malaysian Cabinet Retreat, the brainchild of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, is unique and productive for both governments, Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said although the meeting was informal, its substance was real and pertaining to relations between the two countries.

"I had a good discussion with Prime Minister Thaksin in a four-eye meeting. We covered a lot of areas, but I do not wish at this moment to make any special announcement," he told a joint media conference at the end of the half-day Cabinet Retreat here today.

The Thai government was represented by its entire Cabinet while in the Malaysia side all ministers were present except Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik.

Also in the Malaysian delegation were Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain and Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Samsudin Osman.

Dr Mahathir said he and Thaksin had reached a lot of understandings, and that they believed their meeting could resolve problems between the two countries soon.

All the talks today, including the "sofa meeting" between ministers, were held behind closed doors, but it is believed that issues covered in the discussions included terrorism, cross-border security, manpower, agriculture development and the planned 366km gas pipeline from the Gulf of Thailand to the Malaysian peninsula.

Dr Mahathir said he felt that this meeting, the first of its kind in the world, had been fruitful and would pave the way for more cordial relations between the two neighbours.

"It is unique and I think it will spell an improvement in relations between the two countries," he said.

He hoped that more such meetings would be held in the future in the same setting and environment as today's Cabinet Retreat.

He noted that it signified a kind of special relationship shared by Malaysia and Thailand.

"You may notice that I am now sitting in front of the Thai flag while Prime Minister Thaksin sits in front of the Malaysian flag. Normally this is taboo and we cannot do this.

"This is all wrong and the protocol people are at the moment sweating," he quipped.

Dr Mahathir hoped that this kind of meeting could be held with other Asean members.

"Perhaps Malaysia and Thailand are two countries best suited to lead the way or show an example on how two neighbouring countries can work together and cooperate for the mutual good of both countries," he said.

Concurring with Dr Mahathir that the meeting was able to iron out a few longstanding issues between the two countries, Thaksin said the concept of the Cabinet Retreat could strengthen Asean and work for the good of its people.

"We believe we can work better this way, more efficient in resolving our problems.

"I hope in the future our ministers and officials could pick up the phone and talk things out more freely," he said.

-- BERNAMA
MFJ YBY