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## Renewing Malaysia-Thai ties, strengthening bilateral understanding

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HUGE yellow billboards in the city and a red carpet welcome with a 19-gun salute at the Royal Thai Air Force base greeted Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on his first visit to Thailand as Prime Minister.

And all this for a visit that has been billed as "a courtesy call" on his Asean colleagues. Bangkok is the fourth stop for Abdullah after Brunei, Indonesia and Singapore on his familiarisation tour since taking over as Malaysia's fifth Prime Minister from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Oct 31. Abdullah is scheduled to visit Laos, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar in quick succession.

Even though it was the first meeting between Abdullah and his Thai counterpart Thaksin Shinawatra as leaders of their respective governments, they are no strangers to each other.

As Abdullah said: "I have come here to meet an old friend", while Thaksin said he was "welcoming a close friend and brother". The two have known each other since they both served as foreign ministers.

According to Thaksin, the Malaysian Prime Minister had in his previous capacities "contributed significantly to the strengthening of relations between Malaysia and Thailand... Therefore, in many respects, we feel as if we are welcoming back one of our own".

The bilateral relations are "very good" but the fact remains that there will always be issues that will crop up between close neighbours. Maturity and sincerity go a long way in ironing out differences. It was amply demonstrated during the four-eyed meeting which was followed by the delegation meeting of the two sides.

Malaysia and Thailand, who share a common border, have agreed to work closely to resolve any problems, develop the area and bring progress to people in the region.

While there was no set agenda for the meeting, developments in southern Thailand, and especially the violence following the attack on the Narathiwat army camp, were discussed.

Bangkok has sought Malaysia's assistance to deal with developments in this region and earlier this month Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai was in Kuala Lumpur seeking help. He was not disappointed as Malaysia is prepared to enhance its exchange of information and co-ordination of activities.

Abdullah assured Thaksin that Malaysia would continue to extend the necessary assistance to Thailand in its effort to fight bandits operating along the common border. The two neighbours have proposed to revive joint military patrols along their common border to strengthen security.

Malaysia and Thailand, Thaksin said, not only share a common border, but also a "common destiny". The two nations he added are "bound together by strong historical ties and mutually beneficial engagements".

It is in the interests of both countries and of the Asean region that problems are resolved. This is because as the Thai Premier said "whatever happens to one country, whether good or bad, affects the other".

The violence in southern Thailand has given rise to various theories and fuelled speculation. In an interview with the Bangkok Post, Abdullah said there was no indication that the violence in southern Thailand was linked to the activities of al-Qaeda or Jemaah Islamiyah.

The Thai premier said authorities in both countries had been exchanging intelligence on terrorist activities in that area and would work closely

in finding solutions to the problem.

The situation "is under control", Abdullah said, and the two leaders agreed on the need to bring development and progress to those in the southern Thai provinces.

Development of these areas will help the people there to progress and as a result, could help take them away from terrorist activities.

The two Prime Ministers have directed their Foreign Ministers to co-chair a joint committee to look into the development of areas along the common border.

"We have emphasised the importance of development in the border areas because we think we will have positive impact to create stability and opportunities to the people in that area," Abdullah said.

Just as Malaysia has continuously stressed the importance of identifying the root causes of terrorism, Malaysia and Thailand are determined to deal with poverty and a sense of deprivation in areas along their common borders and bring about development and progress to benefit the people.

Abdullah said ties between the two countries would be strengthened to expedite development of various projects. This, the Prime Minister stressed, "will have a positive effect and we can move forward and progress".

The two neighbours have resolved to enhance co-operation in various fields. This includes partnership to include the development of the Golok River, the setting up of an Islamic Development Bank, co-operation in fisheries, joint tourism promotion especially in the Langkawi-Phuket, Langkawi-Tarutao areas and development of the IMT-GT (India, Malaysia, Thailand-Growth Triangle).

Co-operation in various fields will certainly enable the two countries to enhance bilateral trade and people-to-people contacts. Cross border trade between Malaysia and Thailand along their common borders is believed to be flourishing and, according to one estimate, it could be in billions of ringgit.

Harnessing the potential that exists and capitalising on the strengths of each other can only be beneficial for the people and a means to resolve the security situation.

The day long visit, in addition to strengthening bilateral understanding and co-operation, also served to renew "leader-to-leader ties".