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Rice smuggling at borders and ports gets top billing

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UTUSAN Malaysia's focus over the past three days is on rice smuggling, following its exposure on the rampant smuggling of the commodity at borders and ports.

Yesterday, besides the main story on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's statement that the Government would formulate several strategies to curb rice smuggling, the paper reported that thousands of tonnes of rice were waiting to be brought into the country from border towns in Thailand.

In an eight-hour stake-out in the towns of Taba in Takbai and Golok and Bukit Tar in Weng, its journalists observed lorries carrying rice arriving from northern and central Thailand. The consignments were later stored in hundreds of ware-houses in the towns.

The paper said the Malaysia-bound rice were held up due to stricter enforcement by Malaysian authorities following reports of rampant smuggling of the commodity.

Quoting sources, the report stated that Taba was the main storage centre for Thai rice to be smuggled into Malaysia. Seventy per cent of smuggled rice in the Malaysian market came from this town.

Berita Harian, meanwhile, reported the arrest of a rice smuggler known as Yusuf Hitam at the border town of Rantau Panjang in Kelantan.

He was wanted in connection with an incident where a man, who was caught smuggling two bags of rice, challenged a Customs officer to a fight, and later assaulted him.

Kelantan police chief Datuk Mohd Najib Abdul Aziz said the man was suspected to be involved in three intimidation cases and assaulting members of the General Operations Force.

In another page-one news in Utusan, it was reported that United States President George W. Bush would be protected by a 1,000-security team at the Asia-Pacific leaders' summit in Thailand in October.

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra confirmed Bush's attendance, as well as the security force which would accompany him.

Thailand has been on alert after it was discovered that terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah had targeted the Apec meeting. This was revealed following the arrest of JI's top man, Hambali, in Thailand last week.

Thai Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh said Apec leaders bringing in their own security detail had to adhere to the country's security procedures.

He said 15,000 security personnel would be deployed for the meeting.

Berita Harian commented yesterday on the rising number of students in boarding schools being beaten by their schoolmates.

The paper said there was a need to prevent negative elements from damaging the image of residential schools, adding that entry requirements should be tightened.

In the letters page, Utusan carried comments from a reader opposing the proposal that a Parliament for university students be set up, an idea mooted by the University Malaya Students' Representative Council.