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Thaksin: I admire Dr M (HL)

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BANGKOK, Wed. - Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra today acknowledged that he is an ardent admirer of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his policies which include the acceleration of bilateral ties and a common destiny for Asia.

He said Dr Mahathir had given him valuable advice in all their encounters, adding that he did not mind being tutored by him.

"I am a new and younger leader. So, I have no problems in admiring Dr Mahathir, placing him as a more senior leader in terms of political life, age and experience. I have admired him for many years, even before I entered politics," he said in an interview with New Straits Times Press group editor-in-chief Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad at the Prime Minister's office today.

The businessman-turned-politician, who has changed the Thai political and economic landscape since coming to the helm two-and-a-half years ago, said Dr Mahathir had enhanced the pace of bilateral ties by suggesting joint activities to equally benefit both nations.

This culminated in the joint meeting between the Thai and Malaysian Cabinets during Hari Raya Puasa last year in Jitra, Kedah, "a meeting that drew the attention of the world".

"That was the first of its kind in the world. That is what has happened under our two leaderships," he said in crisp and concise English during the 45-minute interview.

Asked about the post-Mahathir era, he said he would try to do more to strengthen bilateral relations which have traditionally been positive under various leaderships.

Thaksin, who had invited Dr Mahathir to the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation meeting in Thailand in October, said he was glad that the Prime Minister had accepted.

"That is very nice of him. And it is also an honour that in 2002 he allowed (Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri) Abdullah (Ahmad Badawi) to be there (Apec meeting) on his behalf. But for Thailand, his neighbour, he has given me the honour of coming himself. That is an honour for me and my country. We will share a little of his history - his last Apec meeting was here in Thailand."

To a question on the seriousness of the separatist movement in the south and the threat posed by Islamic terrorists, he said it was not a serious problem and had been contained by Thai security forces.

He said it was similar to the situation in certain other counties where there was organised crime involving drugs, trafficking in women and forest encroachment.

"But some activities are different when weapons like rifles such as AK-47 and M-16 become a commodity in the south because of the activities related to Jemaah Islamiyah and Aceh."

Thailand could tackle the problem with Malaysia's help, and his Government was doing its best to give Thai Muslims a higher profile, said Thaksin, who recently appointed Mohamad Nor Matha to the Home Affairs Ministry.

"We are trying to invite Muslims to join our parties. But not many of them are really interested in politics. We would like to see more of them (in politics)," he said.

On the presence of Thai students at Universiti Petronas, he said Muslims

of southern Thailand "regarded Malaysians as their relatives, their cousins".

Thaksin, saying that he was also a friend of Abdullah, added that they had both been Foreign Ministers at the same time.

"We had a very good relationship when I was Minister of Foreign Affairs. I went to Malaysia twice. Once on an official visit, and that was my first meeting with Dr Mahathir. And second, during the joint commission meeting.

"I will try to do more. Not because I am closer to Abdullah than to Dr Mahathir. But because I will be staying longer and will have more time to think about how we can do it together."

To a suggestion that Malaysia and Singapore individually appeared to be doing very well due to long leadership and stability, he said long leadership was very important.

"Long and capable leadership. You need this. And if you have that you will automatically have the support of the public. This is because democracy comes from the people.

"So, if you do something good for the people, they will support you and keep you in office."