

Tending the ground
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IN the quiet, earnest discussions between the leaders of Thailand and Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur this week, new hope emerged for the afflicted provinces of southern Thailand.

The decades-long unease that has benighted those territories flared into a violent insurgency three years ago, which has since claimed more than 2,300 lives. Militants have targeted troops, schools and places of worship, with counter-claims among the local populace of harsh treatment by security forces. Malaysia occupies a peculiar position in this conflict, being both at the frontline by virtue of its long historical association with Thailand's Muslim and Malay southern provinces, yet sidelined by almost as long-standing a tradition of non-interference among the sovereign nations of Asean.

Our position has always been to hope that Bangkok would understand and address the concerns of the two million people of the country's south, especially in the flashpoint provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala. Since last year's September coup, the Thai government has demonstrated much greater sensitivity to the southern situation than its predecessor. Thai premier Surayud Chulanont has visited the area, venturing even overnight stays in designated "red areas" of most intense militant activity.

The sincerity of his commitment was amply reflected during Surayud's KL visit. He returns to Bangkok having renewed an understanding with the Malaysian administration of Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi that Malaysia will do all it can to help improve conditions in southern Thailand, in the most productive ways possible. Bangkok has rolled back earlier rhetoric of Thai militants finding succour and support in Malaysia, tempering that perception with an acknowledgement of the family and community ties spanning the border. This further clears the way forward for Malaysia's long-stated initiatives in human, social and economic development.

Where initial growth-triangle visions of major industrial development now seem unworkably grandiose, there is surely hope in what assistance Malaysia may now venture in education and training, entrepreneurial development and basic infrastructure, such as the bridge linking Tanah Merah in Kelantan with Bukit Tar in Thailand. The introduction of Islamic banking should also be welcomed by a populace that keenly wishes to see greater institutionalisation in such respects, long felt to be ignored if not actively disdained by the rest of their country.

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