

'No sign terrorists using Langkawi'

BANGKOK, Tues. — There was no evidence that Langkawi was being used by Muslim insurgents in southern Thailand, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He hoped Malaysia and Thailand would not use "megaphone diplomacy" to solve problems.

"Langkawi is not meant for terrorists. Even Thai Foreign Minister Kantathi Suphamongkhon was there recently for the opening of the Thai consulate on the island.

"I don't know how this statement can be made, Langkawi is a holiday resort and I am advisor to the development there... everyone goes there and I don't have such contact (with militants)," he told reporters after meeting former Thai Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun.

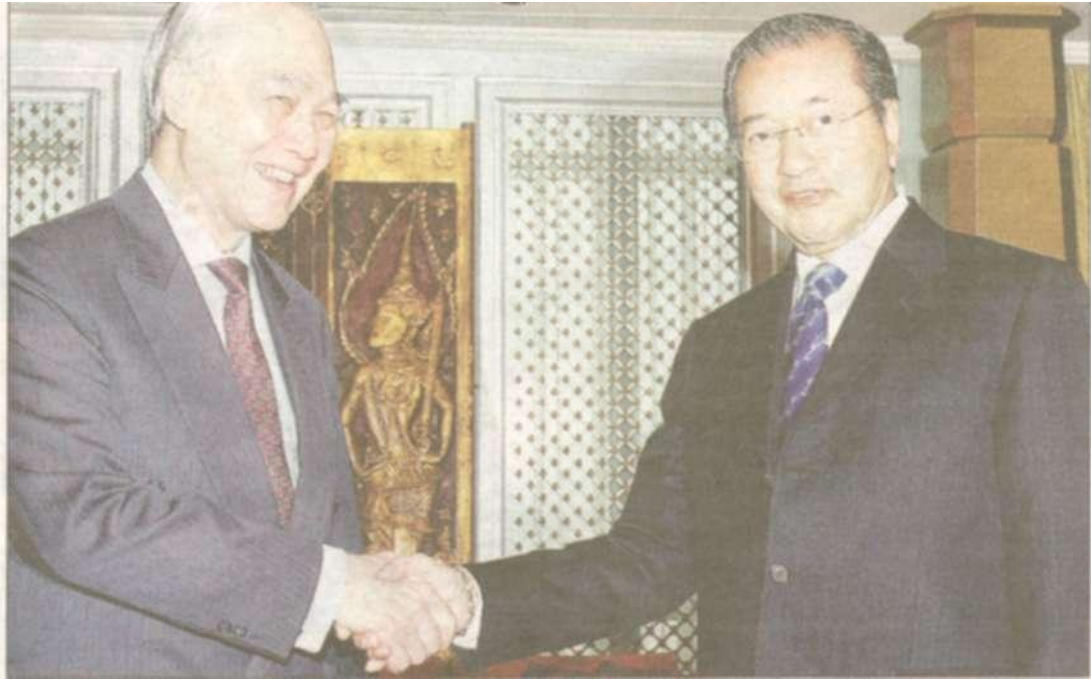
A Thai minister recently alleged that Langkawi was being used by terrorists to plot violence in the Muslim-dominated Thai southern provinces.

Dr Mahathir and his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali arrived here yesterday for a two-day visit at Anand's invitation. He met Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra for talks on the restive southern provinces.

Dr Mahathir, however, declined to comment on his hour-long discussions with Thaksin or even confirm if the talks centred on the situation in the Muslim-majority south where more than 1,000 people have died since violence escalated in January last year.

Dr Mahathir said he was given the impression that the relationship between the two neighbours was strained largely due to the southern issue and the plight of the 131 Thai Muslims who fled to Kelantan in August.

"But I find the people here friendly. The relationship between the two neighbours usu-



MEETING AN OLD FRIEND: Dr Mahathir with Anand in Bangkok yesterday.

ally goes through a period of change but not a permanent change... occasionally some problem will cause strain but this thing will heal in itself."

Dr Mahathir said common problems affecting ties were border issues like re-delineation and offshore resources, but all these had been solved in the past.

The important thing was for both sides to continue talking, he said. "Nothing can be solved by shouting. I think leaders from both sides are sensible people and they know what to do."

Dr Mahathir, who said he had a soft spot for Thailand, said he would convey to the Malaysian Foreign Ministry officials what transpired during his meeting with Thaksin. Anand and also Thaksin's advisor, Preeda Patanatabut.

Asked to comment on his earlier suggestion that the southern provinces be given full autonomy, Dr Mahathir said it was made a long time ago. He declined to elaborate.

Earlier, Anand told the media that Dr Mahathir's suggestion on autonomy was misunderstood by the Thai people.

"When translated to Thai, it means something like independence and this gives a wrong impression. When I told him (Tun) about this, he laughed as this was not what he meant," said Anand.

Anand, Chairman of the National Reconciliation Commission formed by the Government to find solutions to the southern issue, said Dr Mahathir referred to power-sharing or something that was similar to Malaysia's federal system when? States and

the people have some say.

Asked if Dr Mahathir's visit would have some impact on the relations between the two countries, Anand said his former counterpart was not acting on behalf of the Malaysian Government. "But he was Prime Minister for 22 years and is an influential figure in politics. His words carry weight."

He said both considered the strained relationship between the two nations to be due to misunderstanding and clashes through the media.

With officials on talking terms now and a brief meeting between Thaksin and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in Busan, South Korea, last week. Anand said things were getting better and improved ties were on the cards. — Bernama