

# Tete-a-tete to clear the air

**I**T WAS supposed to have been a "private chat." but there's no such thing when you have two such political icons.

So when former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad touched down at Don Muang International Airport on Monday evening for a dinner appointment with Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the press was there hoping to "ambush" him.

But he was whisked away immediately to a private residence for that dinner. A few hardy reporters milled about outside the gates, to no avail. When Dr Mahathir finally checked into his hotel in downtown Bangkok, some hung around the lobby until midnight, hoping to slip through the security net.

It was all in vain. It was only the next day, after the long-serving Malaysian leader had two more meetings with Thai authorities and before he was scheduled to fly off to an audience with the King of Thailand, did Dr Mahathir agree to meet the press.

"With 'your' Dr M. we know we're going to get a headline story," a local reporter said.

There were conditions of course. "I am not here to comment on internal issues, and I can't speak about what the Thai Prime Minister and I discussed," he told reporters from Malaysian, Thai and international media organisations.

"It was a personal conversation between two old friends, and the only thing I can tell you is that we both agreed that there should be no more megaphone diplomacy," he added.

He was referring to the escalating war of words between Malaysian and Thai politicians over the last few months, engendered by the insurgency in Thailand's Muslim-majority southernmost provinces which border Malaysia's northern states.

When 131 Thai Muslims fled across the border into Kelantan in late August, a diplomatic row ensued. The Thai government claimed they were insurgents and demanded they be handed back.

The Malaysian government asked the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to interview them to determine if they were refugees, which Thai authorities



## Thai Takes

By A. ASOHAN

took as an insult.

It went downhill from there, despite occasional peacemaking efforts by cooler heads - such as the deputy prime ministers of both countries pledging to mend ties in October - and a brief meeting between Thaksin and Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Busan, South Korea earlier this month.

What you needed was a miracle worker.

Which led former Thai prime minister Anand Panyarachun, also chairman of the National Reconciliation Committee (NRC) tasked with studying the southern insurgency, to invite Dr Mahathir for a private chat with Thaksin.

"He's not here on behalf of his government, but having been the prime minister for 21 years, we know his words carry a lot of weight," Anand told the media after his own meeting with Dr Mahathir.

Thaksin has made no secret of his admiration for Dr Mahathir, even declaring him his role model. Indeed, in one cover story, US magazine *Newsweek* described the Thai leader as "the new Mahathir."

The former Malaysian PM, for his part, had earmarked Thaksin for a greater leadership role within Asean in the early days of the latter's premiership.

"I've always had a soft spot for Thailand and know the Prime Minister well," Dr Mahathir said at Tuesday's press conference.

However, efforts by various parties, including some segments of the Thai media, to portray the Mahathir-Thaksin relationship as that of one between mentor and protege have begun to fray at the edges.

Thaksin's critics say that he wants to remake



**WEIGHTY WORDS:** Former Thai prime minister Anand (left) welcomed Dr Mahathir's help, saying his words still carried a lot of weight, while inset shows the *Newsweek* cover describing Thaksin as 'the new Mahathir'. — *The Nationpic/ANN*

Thailand in Malaysia's mould, but hasn't taken into account cultural and historical differences. While the Thai government is more centralised, its political landscape is more fractured.

Thaksin's direct approach paid dividends early in his political career, giving the country much-needed leadership after the dithering previous administration failed to pull Thailand out of the downward spiral of the Asian economic crisis.

But strong leadership quickly becomes seen as "heavy-handedness" when things start going badly.

Thaksin has been beset by a string of controversies, ranging from corruption scandals and fal-

tering projects-to, not the least, the escalating violence down south. His response to most of these has been to shoot from the hip.

And while that may be seen as typical Dr Mahathir, a reporter from a Thai-language newspaper said it best at Tuesday's informal press conference: "When Dr Mahathir shoots from the hip, he's usually telling those truths that the rest of us find too uncomfortable to utter."

"When Thaksin does it, it only shows his bad marksmanship."

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