

Dr M helped arrange talks

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At least two meetings held on Langkawi, but no major breakthrough produced

BANGKOK: Former Malaysian prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad quietly helped arrange at least two meetings between Thai officials, including some generals, and Muslim separatist leaders on Malaysia's island of Langkawi, but the talks produced no major breakthrough, rebel and government sources said on Thursday.

A senior Thai security official and a prominent exiled leader from the Yawi Malay-speaking southern provinces were quick to downplay the significance of the Langkawi sessions - the last one held three months ago.

The sources said Dr Mahathir was not in a position to push the peace process towards any meaningful end because he was no longer a government representative.

"There was nothing special about the meetings. Dr Mahathir was just acting in his capacity as a private person,

although it was difficult for anybody to decline an invitation," a rebel source said.

Many of the militant leaders reportedly reside in northern Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur consistently denies any involvement with the insurgency in southern Thailand.

In September last year, amid a war of words between Thailand and Malaysia over the 131 Thai Muslim villagers who fled their homes and took refuge in northern Malaysia, then Thai defence minister Thamarak Isarangura assailed Dr Mahathir, telling reporters that Muslim insurgents had been holding meetings in Langkawi.

Army chief Gen Sonthi Boonyaratkalin confirmed that insurgents had indicated that they would like to engage with Thai officials, but declined to single out any separatist organisation.

"This will not be a negotiation. We will just talk, to find solutions," said Sonthi, who heads the Council of National Security - the military junta behind the Sept 19 coup.

Sonthi said he had assigned Fourth Army Area commander Lt-Gen Viroj Buachoroon to consider the appropriate officials to represent the Thai side.

"If we have a chance to talk to each other, that could be the way to solve the problem," Sonthi said.

One of the leading separatist movements, the Patani United Liberation Organisation (Pulo), agreed with the new conciliatory approach in principle but declined to say what would be put on the table for discussion.

"Pulo has not been officially contacted by the Thai government for any dialogue, but Pulo welcomes the opportunity to exchange views (with Thai officials)," said Kasturi Mahkota, Pulo's

foreign affairs chief.

In a statement dated Sept 1, Kasturi said Pulo welcomed Sonthi's proposal to enter into a dialogue with the Malays' "liberation movements ... provided that there must be sincere commitment from the Thai government in handling the problem-solving process."

Pulo laid out several preconditions: the discussions must be facilitated by a third party, the "liberation movement's delegation must be considered (by the Thai government as) official," and immunity must be granted fully to the movements' delegation.

Kasturi also told *The Nation* that Pulo was willing to settle for something less than full independence for the "deep South."

Sonthi's announcement was seen as an abrupt policy change from the administration of ousted prime minis-

ter Thaksin Shinawatra but in fact, said rebel and official sources, several informal encounters between officials and rebel leaders had been staged in various places in European cities.

Agence-France Presse quoted a Thai official as saying Thai authorities would hold talks with two insurgent groups early next month.

"Core leaders of both the Patani United Liberation Organisation and Bersatu have contacted us through senior figures in Malaysia to propose peace talks," the official said.

"Negotiations are expected to take place in one month after the Cabinet is named, so possibly in early November, and negotiations would be organised in a neutral country like Singapore," the official said.

Kasturi declined to comment on the news report. - The Nation / Asia News Network