

PM: Malaysia awaiting formal request for help

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MALAYSIA is well placed to mediate between Thailand and the Muslim separatists in the southern Thai provinces, but a formal request is needed for that from Bangkok, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

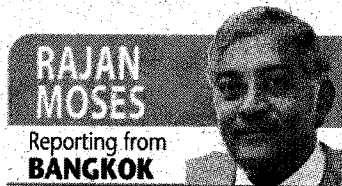
The prime minister said he knew his Thai counterpart, Gen Surayud Chulanont, was very serious about restoring peace in his country's troubled south and attaining a permanent solution to the Muslim insurgency there.

"It is up to them to make a formal request for Malaysia to play a bigger role in helping resolve the issue there. Malaysia is well placed as it has the capability and capacity to do that and we understand the Thai situation and the stand of the government," he said at the end of a three-day visit to Thailand.

"Moreover, we know the separatist groups, in the sense that they are Muslims, of Malay descent and Malaysia has good relations with Thailand."

Asked if Thailand had requested Malaysia to play a mediatory role, he said the Thai government would make a formal request.

Thailand has been grappling with the insurgency in the south-



ern provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani that has killed nearly 2,000 people over the past three years.

Last October, Surayud visited Malaysia and sought its assistance to find ways to end the insurgency and restore peace in the violence-racked south.

Abdullah was in Phuket on Sunday on the invitation of the Thai premier for informal talks.

On Monday, he arrived in Bangkok with a high-powered Malaysian delegation, including the menteri besar of Perlis, Kedah and Perak, and had an audience with Thai monarch King Bhumibol Adulyadej before again meeting Surayud and senior ministers.

During the visit, one concrete measure agreed on between Malaysia and Thailand in efforts to restore order in the south was the launch of a crackdown on people living with dual citizenship

along the common border of the two countries.

The authorities of both countries will use biometric methods (thumb-printing) and data to verify the citizenship of those with dual citizenship. Once the dual citizens have been verified, they would be given a choice on whether they want to remain permanently in Thailand or Malaysia.

In this way, the authorities would be able to keep track of the movements of their citizens and residents along the common border and troubled areas and also check crime.

Thailand has said there could be up to 100,000 such dual citizens criss-crossing the border.

Abdullah said Thailand and Malaysia had submitted 500 names each of suspected dual citizens, whose origins would be traced in a process that could take about a week.

But he stressed that the crack-down on dual citizenship was only one of several measures that needed to be taken to restore peace in southern Thailand.

Malaysia had also proposed that more Malaysian investments be made in southern Thailand to provide more job opportunities

in the area.

The prime minister had indicated that Malaysia was willing to accept southern Thais at its institutions of higher learning so that they could get qualifications for better jobs, and suggested that moderate Islam Hadhari be introduced to counter radicalism.

Asked if steps proposed by and to Surayud's military government to end the violence might be binding and upheld in the long term as Surayud is due to relinquish his post after elections are held at year-end, Abdullah said:

"Surely the measures taken are long term ones that need to be continued. So, I don't see the next government wanting to make changes when the measures are progressing well."

On whether Malaysia may be blamed if anything went wrong with the process to attain peace in southern Thailand, the prime minister said Malaysian proposals would first have to be accepted by the Thai government and implementation also depended on them.

"We work on the basis that the Thai government gave us the go ahead. It is they who will be blamed if anything goes wrong."