

Thai PM affirms KL role in southern peace talks

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Thai Muslim women walking past barbed wire while protesting against a shooting incident in which two villagers were injured in Yala on Thursday. — AFP picture

BANGKOK: Thailand and Malaysia will work closely to restore peace in the restive southern provinces, Thai Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont confirmed yesterday.

He said this would include mediating with the separatist groups.

Surayud said that during his meeting with Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in Phuket and Bangkok several days ago, both sides had agreed that talking to the separatists was a positive approach.

"The Malaysian government believes talking with separatists is good and a better way. They also

told us they are not supporting the separatists. Anyway, if there is any problem, it should be solved through negotiation.

"We have agreed that there should be talks if Malaysia can help Thailand figure out which groups we should hold talks with, and if such talks can produce substantial and effective results.

"We don't want to talk about rice with mango farmers. That is, we want to talk with the right people who can yield results," he said.

Surayud said the Malaysian government acknowledged the south-

ern issue was a domestic problem and was willing to assist the Thai government consult with the separatist groups.

He said an information team had been set up to meet the insurgents but he declined to name its leader.

His comments followed a statement by Thai Foreign Minister Nitya Pibulsonggram two days ago that there were no plans to ask Malaysia to mediate with the insurgent groups.

Abdullah told the Malaysian media on Monday in Bangkok that Malaysia was well placed to medi-

ate between Thailand and the Muslim separatists but a formal request was needed from the Thai government.

Nitya had said there was no plans for such mediation and therefore no necessity to make the request.

The separatist insurgency was one of the key topics during discussions between Surayud and Abdullah, who vowed to co-operate with Thailand to resolve the violence, which has killed more than 1,900 people since 2004. — Agencies