

Pak Lah on Thai visit

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Trip to enhance ties and help solve problems in the south

BANGKOK: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi arrived in Phuket yesterday for a three-day visit to Thailand aimed at strengthening neighbourly ties and helping to ease the armed conflict in the kingdom's Muslim-majority south.

Abdullah and his entourage, including Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, were received at the airport at 11.25am by Thai Foreign Minister Nitya Pibulsongkram, Phuket Governor Niran Kalayanamit, Malaysian Ambassador to Thailand Datuk Shaarani Ibrahim and Thai government officials.

Abdullah started his visit with an informal meeting with his Thai counterpart Gen Surayud Chulanont by playing a round of golf.

Tomorrow, Abdullah will fly to Bangkok for an audience with King Bhumipol Adulyadej and later, he will attend a bilateral meeting with Surayud at Government House.

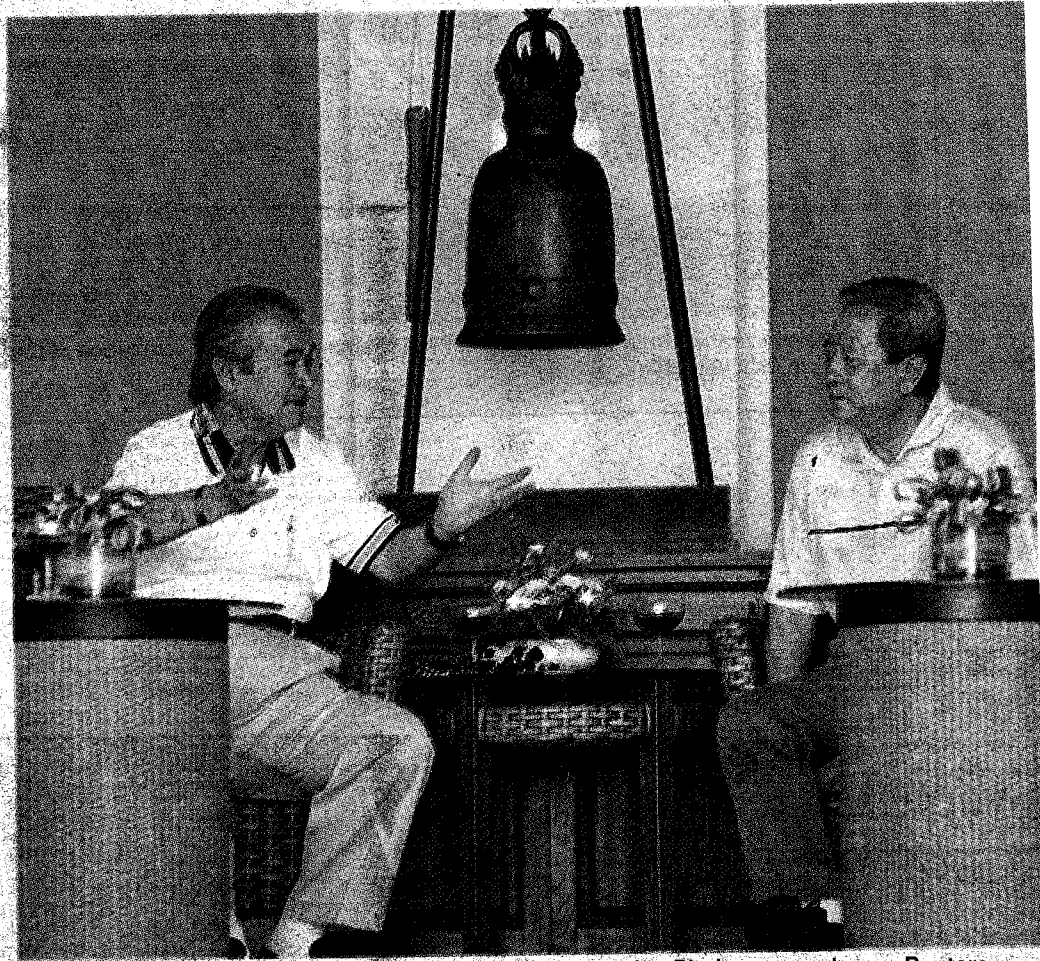
"They will discuss many issues including the problem in the south," Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman Kitti Wasinond said.

"As a neighbouring country of Thailand, Malaysia has expressed its willingness to help solve the situation in the south and we will discuss what Thailand and Malaysia can do together to solve the problem," Kitti said.

The Prime Minister's visit was hailed in an editorial by *The Nation*, Thailand's leading English newspaper, as a chance to partner with Thailand to end the southern insurgency.

"His trip comes at a time when the kingdom has been trying hard to improve the dire situation in the southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat," *The Nation* wrote on Saturday.

Abdullah will return to Malaysia tomorrow morning.



Friendly conversation: Abdullah chatting with Surayud in Phuket yesterday. — Reuters