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PM: Malaysia-Thailand ties to enter next phase

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■ **By Sharanjit Singh
and Audrey Dermawan**
news@nst.com.my

GEORGE TOWN: The Malaysian and Thai governments have pledged to work closely to improve bilateral ties and end the deadly insurgency in the southern Thai provinces.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said both countries had established close ties over the past 50 years and it was time relations were further enhanced.

"It is time we further widened and deepened our relations as closer ties will benefit both countries," he said at the end of the annual Malaysia-Thailand consultation with his Thai counterpart, Surayud Chulanont, here yesterday.

Expressing satisfaction at the outcome of the meeting, Abdullah said besides helping in educational programmes, the government had also agreed to provide opportunities such as training for small businessmen in southern Thailand.

He said Malaysia also agreed to help introduce Islamic banking there.

"We are able to provide all the technical assistance that may be required."

Abdullah also touched on the construction of a bridge connecting Tanah Merah in Kelantan and Bukit Tar on the Thai side.

He said the bridge was already half com-

plete on the Malaysian side and hoped it would be ready by the end of this year.

He said the inter-university games between Malaysia and Thailand would be reintroduced.

"We have decided to commence what we had before, games between Universiti Malaya and Chulalongkorn University where there used to be rugby matches.

"We want to get our young people to meet once a year in the sports event so that they can develop friendships and contacts."

Echoing Abdullah's sentiments, Surayud said it was important for both countries to work even more closely in the next 50 years.

Earlier, Surayud and his wife Chitravadee Chulanont visited the Wat Chaiyaman-garam Thai Buddhist temple here. They spent almost an hour in the temple where they participated in a religious ceremony and mingled with some 200 Thais living here.

In his speech, Surayud said his visit was to strengthen Malaysia-Thailand relations.

"We want to have social and economic co-operation. We also have to help each other solve the problem in the south," he said, adding that the Thai government would seek Malaysia's help to resolve the problem.

Violence in the mainly Muslim southern Thai provinces has seen more than 2,300 people dead after renewed separatism erupted in 2004.

Asked about the Thai request later, Abdullah said Malaysia was willing to help out in any way it could.

"It depends on what the Thai government wants us to do."

Surayud was also asked whether he was concerned about Sunday's referendum, which showed many people still supported ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Surayud said the referendum was the first step towards democratic elections and it showed the Thai people accepting the new constitution.

"I think by that time, in December, the Thai people, have to choose a new government and I think they do understand the difficult time we have had in the last two years."

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