

MALAYSIA, THAILAND ANNOUNCE STEPS TO BRING PEACE TO SOUTH THAILAND

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- Formula to settle dual citizenship issue
- Officials to work on other joint initiatives

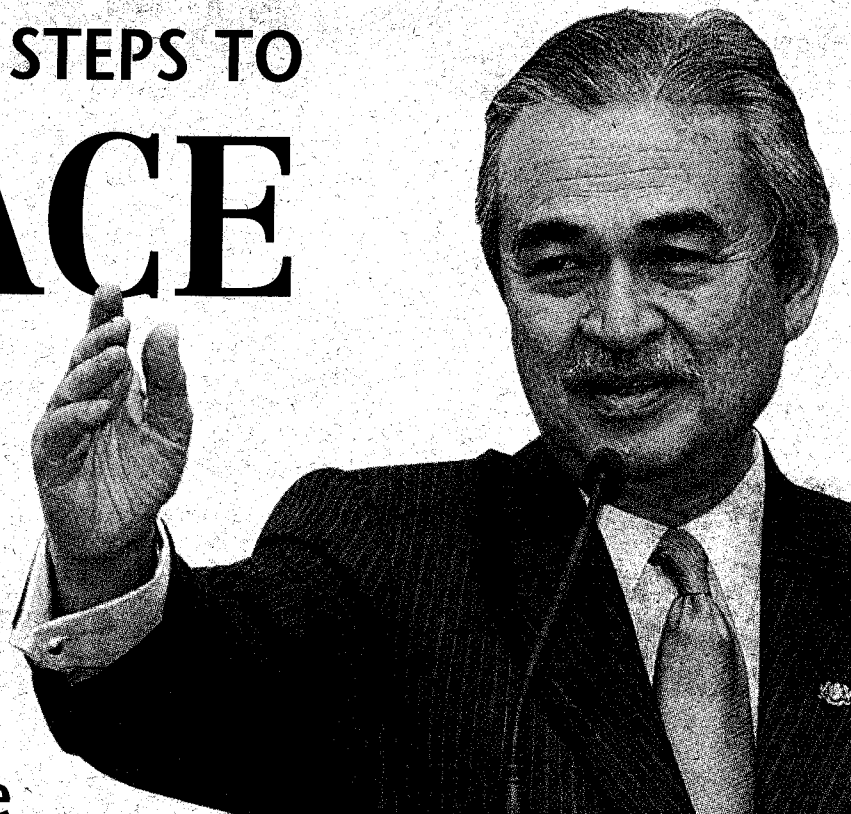
BANGKOK: Malaysia and Thailand announced a major breakthrough yesterday in their first serious effort at the highest level of government to bring peace and order to southern Thailand.

The two had agreed to use biometric methods (thumb prints and particulars) to identify those with dual citizenship on both sides of the border and get them to choose which country they wanted to be citizens of, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi told a joint news conference here with his Thai counterpart General Surayud Chulanont after two days of talks.

"We have found a formula. Both sides will present their number of those suspected of holding dual citizenship.

"If they decide to remain in Malaysia in spite of being Thai citizens, we will certainly give them permanent status to stay in Malaysia, and Thailand will reciprocate in the same way in cases of dual citizens there who want to continue to stay in Thailand," he said.

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Abdullah stressing a point at the Press conference in Bangkok yesterday.



Malaysia offers skills training for Thais

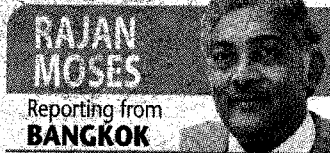
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The move against dual citizenship, to determine those with similar ethnic roots who use one name in Thailand and another in Malaysia, would enable both countries to keep track of their citizens' movements to and from the violence-hit mainly Muslim southern Thai area, check smuggling and curb illegal border crossings, officials said.

"This to me is one of the most positive steps we can take after discussing it for many years," the prime minister said.

Officials of the two countries have begun test runs of the biometric procedure to verify the details of 500 people from the Thai side and 500 from the Malaysian side.

Abdullah's visit to Thailand, including a one-day stopover on Sunday in Phuket for informal talks with Surayud, was mainly in response to a plea from the Thai authorities to help them find ways to overcome an insurgency in the southern provinces that has killed over 2,000 people in the past three years.



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To stress Malaysia's readiness to co-operate with Thailand, the prime minister brought along Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and the Menteri Besar of three northern states bordering Thailand. They are Kedah's Datuk Seri Mahdzir Khalid, Perak's Datuk Seri Tajol Rosli Ghazali and Perlis's Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim.

Abdullah was also reciprocating a visit by Surayud to Malaysia last October after the Sept 19 military coup which ousted the government of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. It marked the start this year of the 50th anniversary of Malaysia-Thailand relations.

The two prime ministers, in a joint statement at the end of their meetings, said they shared concerns over the southern Thai situation and regarded it as impera-

tive that attacks on innocent people be stopped.

Surayud said there were several other joint initiatives under way to bring peace to the south, but details were being worked out by the foreign ministers of the two countries and would be announced later.

Abdullah said Malaysia was also ready to co-operate in bringing development to the troubled region by offering southern Thais opportunities to be trained in Malaysia, from which they could seek employment.

"We are determined to do something about the situation in southern Thailand. We are not wasting time talking, scratching the surface. We believe we have to offer the people development so that there will be something for them to look forward to," he said.

Alluding to reports of rising extremism in the area, Abdullah said he believed education on moderation in religion was important. Sharing the same Sunni denomination as the Muslims across the border, promoting Islam Hadhari to the Thai southerners was one of the ways

Malaysia could help foster peace.

Abdullah made special note of Malaysia's ethnic diversity and its success in integrating the various communities.

He spoke about how ethnic Thais living in the northern Malaysian states enjoyed the same privileges as Bumiputeras while they professed Buddhism.

"We don't force them to embrace Islam. They retain their way of life, they speak Thai and Bahasa Malaysia, and the same goes for our Chinese and Indians."

The joint statement said the two nations would undertake more development projects for border areas under the Thailand-Malaysia Committee on Joint Development Strategy (JDS) and also noted the commencement of the construction of a second bridge across the Sungai Golok, linking Buketa in Thailand and Bukit Bunga in Malaysia.

"The implementation of the JDS projects will improve the quality of life of the people in the border areas and help stimulate growth in southern Thailand and the northern states of peninsular Malaysia," the statement said.