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Thai south conflict internal problem: Najib

BANGKOK: Though emphasizing that the southern Thai conflict is an internal problem and Thailand should be allowed to use its own model to address it, Malaysia views the violence as a serious problem that cannot be underestimated.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak said yesterday Malaysia had no plan to interfere in the domestic affairs of Thailand, but was willing to assist its neighbour in whatever way acceptable to both parties. Asked if the estimated 9,000 to 10,000 militants in the three southern provinces bordering Malaysia would pose a serious threat to both countries, Najib said it would certainly be a problem if left unchecked.

"We don't know the exact number (of militants), there are various numbers. But it is a serious problem because the killings have been going on, the bomb blasts have been going on, therefore we cannot underestimate the seriousness of the problem," he told the Malaysian media after leading the Malaysian delegation at the Fourth Annual Consultation with Thailand.

He said both Malaysia and Thailand needed to address the problem but so far there was no noticeable involvement of foreign elements like the regional terrorist group, Jamaah Islamiyah.

Najib also said he was going ahead with the planned visit to Narathiwat today with his Thai counterpart, Abhisit Vejjajiva, despite Monday night's bomb blast that killed a couple near a hotel where delegates from both countries are staying.

"Yes, *Inshallah*. I don't think the Thais will allow anything to happen," said Najib, who will become the first Malaysian premier to visit the restive province.

He said he was confident the hosts would ensure security and safety for leaders visiting

REUTERS/PIX



Najib is greeted by Abhisit during their meeting at the Government House in Bangkok.

their country. "If they think it is not safe, they will not allow the visit to take place."

Earlier, he told a joint news conference with Abhisit after the meeting at the Government House that the southern people should not consider separation from the kingdom, but remain loyal to the country, its constitution and King.

At the same time, they should be allowed to continue with their own culture and religion, as well as to use their mother tongue and Islamic law, he added.

Najib said he told Abhisit that Malaysia was ready to provide assistance to Thailand to overcome the conflict that had claimed more than 3,500 lives. "The premier gave a candid explanation on Thailand's positive thinking and strategy to bring peace. Malaysia, as a partner, will respect this as a domestic problem," he said.

On his previous suggestion that Bangkok should offer au-

tonomy to the Muslim majority provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala, Najib said there was no disagreement on that matter with Abhisit and Malaysia was acceptable to any model proposed by Thailand.

He said other models used in the southern Philippines and Aceh might not be suitable for Thailand.

Abhisit said his government had already drawn plans that would allow for decentralisation of authority, which gave more opportunities to the local people there to elect their own leaders at both the provincial and district levels.

"We are also moving to lift the emergency decree and replaced it with a special law," said Abhisit, who insisted that his government would continue to engage with the local people and ruled out talks with any separatist group as no one had come forward to claim responsibility for the southern violence. — Bernama