



## Beyond boundaries

**MERGAWATI ZULFAKAR**  
rnerga@thestar.com.my

IT was a triumphant moment for Malaysia on Monday after a ceasefire deal between Cambodia and Thailand was reached.

Accolades came from all over the world as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim announced the deal before clasp- ing the hands of his Cambodian and Thai counterparts in front of the world's press and on five TV.

What many are unaware of is that there had been a behind-the- scenes and very hush-hush meet- ing that took place a few weeks before this diplomatic break- through hosted by Anwar.

Looking back, this incident reflects the Asean way of dealing with issues: with a lot of respect and much tact among all parties involved.

The meeting would not have taken place if the two countries had not trusted Malaysia. At one point, cold feet could have derailed everything had it not been for Malaysia treating the matter with a lot of sensitivity and understanding.

It was during the 58th Asean Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur in early July that Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan, concerned by develop- ments at Thai-Cambodian bor- ders, decided to approach his two counterparts, Thailand's Maris Sangiampongsa and Cambodia's Prak Sokhonn.

The simmering dispute had already killed dozens of people

# Diplomacy and the honest broker

**A quiet Malaysian diplomatic initiative that began behind closed doors culminated in a globally-lauded ceasefire between two countries. The next step is arranging vital ceasefire details at the General Border Committee meeting beginning tomorrow.**



**Working towards peace:** Anwar (centre) with Mohamad (left) at the ceasefire meeting. The groundwork for that had already been laid by a closed door gathering among foreign ministers last month arranged by Mohamad. — IZZUDIN ABD RAZAK/Prime Minister's Office

and displaced more than 270,000 from both sides of the border.

"As a neighbour and Chair of Asean, I don't want to see my two good friends not talking to each other and felt it was my duty to put them together in the same room. It is as simple as that," Mohamad told this columnist.

"I told them, let's have coffee in my room and put our heads together. They came and left through different doors.

"Such a meeting needs to be conducted away from others, we had to keep it quiet because we had to be really sensitive about a very fragile situation.

"They needed to inform their leaders afterwards. Both of them expressed their appreciation for our initiative.

"That started the ball rolling for the leaders' meeting in Malaysia on Monday," Mohamad added.

Anwar was briefed every step of the way. Following the foreign ministers' meeting, it was Anwar's turn to convince Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and

acting Thai Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai to come to Malaysia, urging them to find a peaceful solution and agree to a ceasefire.

One officer said the diplomatic effort is best described as Malaysia being an honest broker: "Malaysia has no hidden agenda in doing this work. Both parties know this.

"Tok Mat is a blunt and straight-talking person. He met them privately and made them feel comfortable. There is trust, and protecting the trust in the whole process.

"This is the way we deal with issues. It is like you deal with your family members. You don't shame them out there, you deal with the issues in the privacy and comfort of your own environment, behind closed doors.

"The most important thing is to make everybody feel comfortable so that they have trust in Malay- sia. This is our strength. They want to keep it within the family because they trust us and we can

be an honest broker unlike any other parties," said the official.

Anwar also made full use of his own channel of communications with the two leaders and consult- ed other Asean leaders in the past weeks.

"Malaysia is close to Cambodia and Thailand. The Prime Minister has a direct communications advantage and, of course, Malay- sia is the current Asean Chair.

"Without his personal interven- tion and his leadership, the meet- ing might not have taken place. He did his homework and also did not sideline other Asean lead- ers," said another diplomat.

Wisma Putra and other agen- cies were working behind closed doors in preparation for last Monday's meeting at the Prime Minister's official residence, *Seri Perdana*.

The Cambodian and Thai lead- ers were ushered into the meet- ing room. China and the US sent representatives too. The presence of the envoys from the two super- powers called for a delicate diplo- matic balancing act in managing relations.

Malaysia and Asean could not ignore US President Donald Trump's role in calling for the two sides to end the conflict - Trump said he told the two leaders that negotiations to reduce tariffs would not proceed until "the fighting stops".

And China was there because it is Asean's immediate neighbour and plays an important role in this region where Asean needs to be neutral.

Initially the US wanted to co-host the meeting but the Malaysian government was firm in only allowing the US to be the co-organiser instead.

The official joint statement clearly indicated the meeting was

co-organised by the US with the active participation of China "to promote a peaceful resolution to the ongoing situation". Their rep- resentatives were invited to speak and gave short statements.

The mood at the meeting was conciliatory. Everybody was on the same page.

Through their statements it was obvious the Cambodian and Thai leaders wanted the conflict to end. Both countries were losing economically as tourism numbers and border trade declined.

"They had the desire to end it, and those were the vibes as they entered the room. The whole world was watching them and they knew they needed to show some positive development," said an observer.

What's next?

The General Border Committee (GBC) meeting, initially to take place in Phnom Penh, is set to convene in Kuala Lumpur tomor- row. Mohamad said the ceasefire modality must be decided quickly. Brunei, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore have agreed to participate as military observers.

"This will be Asean-led. We are not sending troops but we will have observers at the borders," he explained.

The Malaysian Armed Forces issued a statement yesterday say- ing that the GBC meeting will take place between Aug 4 and 7.

"Malaysia is the neutral venue chosen mutually by Thailand and Cambodia. The terms of reference for the deployment of defence attaches as the interim team and the deployment of an Asean monitoring group will be part of the GBC's agenda," said the statement.

Malaysia, of course, wants this meeting to be successful, bearing in mind its responsibility as Asean Chair. It will be a long-drawn out process as mediating a protracted border dispute is always a delicate matter.

Malaysia is recognised as a good broker and has experience in resolving and mediating con- flicts in the past, such as in the southern regions of the Philippines and Thailand. It is now leveraging its diplomatic ties to facilitate dialogues to ensure the region remains peaceful.

This is not about who gets nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. It is about achieving peace in the region and saving the lives of innocent people.