

## **Mahathir's visit puts new sense of urgency to solve Southern Thai conflict**

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BANGKOK, Oct 26 (Bernama) – There is a new sense of urgency among Malaysian and Thai officials about accelerating the moribund southern Thai peace process following the conclusion of Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's two-day visit to Thailand.

After meeting his counterpart Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha, the 93-year-old leader pledged that Malaysia would help its neighbour in "whatever way possible" to achieve peace in southern Thailand.

"To some extent, it is a new era in terms of direction and the push to quicken the peace process which has been going on for six years," said Malaysia's newly-appointed facilitator for the peace process, Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Noor to the media after meeting Thailand's head of the process, Gen Udomchai Thammasarorath here.

"There is now a "new era" and better momentum for achieving peace in southern Thailand and calls for the process to be quickened," he said.

The 75-year-old former Inspector General of Police (IGP), who was in the Prime Minister's delegation during the bilateral meeting in conjunction with the visit, expressed confidence that the cycle of violence in the provinces which had claimed more than 7,000 lives will end soon.

"Once you've seen the clarity of the whole issue, then its how determined you are in tackling it . I have seen the clarity," he said.

Malaysia has been facilitating the southern Thai peace talks between Bangkok and Mara Patani (Majlis Syura Patani), which represents several groups in the provinces,

During his time in the police force, Abdul Rahim .who took over from former facilitator Datuk Ahmad Zamzamin Hashim, was instrumental in the laying down of arms by the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) and the Hatyai Peace Agreement in 1989.

Prior to the signing of the peace agreement in 1989, the Malaysian government and the CPM spent almost a year talking and negotiating in Phuket.

"I am personally and definitely confident that given the correct momentum, peace in southern Thailand will be achieved sooner rather than later," he said, adding that Udomchai wanted to see things happen within the next four months, although it might be a tall order due to the complexity of the issue.

This is because, according to him, besides talking to the Thai side he will also have to communicate with Muslim separatist movements, comprising of moderate and hardcore groups which do not see eye-to-eye on certain issues.

Since assuming the post three months ago, he has talked with both groups and was confident that the hardcore groups will be part of the peace process he is trying to forge with Bangkok.

The hardcore group refers to the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), especially its shadowy military wing which has been described as the most well armed and influential group operating in southern Thailand. They have been blamed by the authorities for much of the violence occurred in the region.

Asked about demands for independence or autonomy by the separatists, he denied that the groups were seeking independence or extraordinary autonomy.

He said that after three months on the job, he found that the separatists wanted among others autonomy on religious matters, culture and language and to be recognised as

"Thai Muslims."

"All parties must have the political will to find solutions suitable for southern Thailand," said Abdul Rahim.

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