

Thailand appreciates Malaysia's role and contributions to peace process in southern provinces

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By Samantha Tan

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 14 (Bernama) -- Thailand appreciates Malaysia's role and contribution as a facilitator for the ongoing peace process in the kingdom's several restive southern border provinces, says its ambassador to Malaysia Narong Sasitorn.

"The situation on the southern provinces are complex and the whole process takes time. We appreciate the Malaysian government's contributions to provide a facilitator to facilitate dialogues between representatives from the Thai government and from groups that have different opinions in the south.

"For peace, you cannot rush. It has to start from building trust and confidence. Perhaps it is a good start from informal dialogues and people to have more comfort level, trust and confidence to another stage of resolving (the problems)," he told Bernama International News Service, here today.

He was met at a cooking demonstration of Thai cuisine titled "Spiced it right!" with internationally renowned Malaysian chef, Datuk Ismail Ahmad, organised by the Royal Thai Embassy here.

Narong said peace approach was part of Thai government's policy and the process of talking would ensure the government could listen to grievances and come with good solutions.

Malaysia's former Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Noor was appointed August last year as the facilitator for the southern Thailand peace talks between the Thai government and Majlis Syura Patani (Mara Patani).

Mara Patani represents several militant groups in southern Thailand.

On Feb 3, it was reported efforts towards peace in southern Thailand had been thrown into disarray

following the decision by the dialogue panel of Mara Patani to suspend all peace dialogue meetings with the Thai government until after the conclusion of the kingdom's general election, scheduled for March 24.

The following day, the head of the Mara Patani dialogue panel, Shukri Hari, was reported saying that the decision to suspend talks followed the group's disappointment with the attitude of the head of the Thailand peace panel, Gen Udomchai Thammasarorat.

He said Mara Patani and the Thailand dialogue teams arrived in Kuala Lumpur on Feb 2 for the introductory meeting but Mara Patani was informed that Gen Udomchai would not attend the meeting and would only meet him personally and separately.

He said Mara Patani also called on the Thai government to replace Gen Udomchai in order to find a solution to the long-running conflict in southern Thailand.

The introductory meeting, which was to have been held on Feb 3 was arranged by Abdul Rahim who was appointed as the facilitator by Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Since its eruption in 2004, the conflict in the four southern Thailand provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Songkhla has claimed more than 6,500 lives.

Commenting on the upcoming Thailand's election, Narong said the democratic process was vital in line with the country's roadmap to democracy as well as ensuring confidence among the people in the country.

"In fact, is not the first election for us (in Thailand). We have done this, and always on the democratic path since 1932. Of course there were interruptions and hiccups, but looking at the long spectrum of our political development, you will see that we always bounce back even with a stronger commitment to democratic values. This time around we will prove that," he added.

Narong said one of the major improvement made was in the new constitution was to ensure a better check and balance, control of corruption and conflicts of interests, as well as to ensure the continuity of the 20-year National Strategy, a plan to turn Thailand into a developed country by

2037.

He said this year will be an important and busy year for Thailand not only due to the general election, but also the fact that it will be hosting 180 meetings as the ASEAN chairman, and also the three-day coronation ceremony for Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn from May 4.

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