

Dr M and Thaksin: Stop the megaphone diplomacy

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BANGKOK: Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Thai Premier Thaksin Shinawatra have agreed that politicians from both countries should immediately stop indulging in “megaphone diplomacy.”

“Problems are never solved with people shouting at each other. They can only be solved by talking,” Dr Mahathir said at an impromptu press conference yesterday after meeting with Thai officials. Dr Mahathir flew in here on Monday evening for dinner with the Thai prime minister, where they discussed problems in southern Thailand. Ties between both countries have been strained in recent months due to the on-going insurgency in Thailand’s Muslim-majority southernmost provinces which border Malaysia.

The tension came to a head in August when 131 Thai Muslims fled across the border to Kelantan, saying they feared persecution by Thai authorities. The Thai government initially characterised them as “insurgents” and was miffed when Malaysia allowed the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to interview them to determine their actual status. Politicians on both sides began trading barbs, the sharpest of which came from Thaksin himself in September at the Second Asean-UN Summit in New York.

In a thinly-veiled allusion to Malaysia, he said that Asean countries “must be prepared to talk and hold consultations with each other and create a partnership that is based on trust and respect, and not on abuse and opportunism.”

Accusations of “immaturity” and “insincerity” by ministers in both countries followed, culminating in Malaysian activists calling for a boycott of Thai goods and Thai Defence Minister Thamarak Isarangura accusing Langkawi of being a haven for the insurgents.

“This was a personal meeting between old friends where we exchanged opinions and concerns,” Dr Mahathir stressed to members of the media, adding that he was not prepared to comment on internal issues and was not acting on behalf of the Malaysian Government. Dr Mahathir said he would share his opinions and feedback from the meeting with the Foreign Ministry when he returned to Kuala Lumpur.