

KL backs Bangkok for a peaceful south

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PUTRAJAYA: Malaysia will support all programmes initiated by the Thai government to help its people in the south of the country, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said yesterday.

He said it was Malaysia's hope that southern Thailand would be peaceful.

"We want to see the area, where many Muslims live, to be peaceful and where the people can go about their work or business without fear," he said at a joint Press conference with his Thai counterpart, Surayud Chulanont, who is here for a one-day visit.

Malaysia had no intention of creating problems in southern Thailand.

He said the movement of people across their common border should not be interpreted as interference in Thai affairs by Malaysia.

"They have been crossing the border all the time."

Abdullah also said the leaders of both countries would continue to co-operate to resolve problems that might arise from time to time.

On the repatriation of 130 Thai Muslims who fled to Malaysia more than a year ago, Abdullah said Surayud had stated that he would have no problem if they

wanted to remain in the country.

Surayud, the military-backed prime minister installed after last month's coup, signalled that he would take a different approach to the crisis compared to the hard-line stand of the ousted government of Thaksin Shinawatra.

"Let me explain my personal strategy of trying to solve the problems in the south, by peaceful means," he said.

"We will try to talk to a lot of people. Initially I told the Malaysian prime minister that I will talk to the Muslim leaders in the south, talk to kids in schools. That is the

way I'm trying to present myself, by way of talking."

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak later held talks with Surayud where they discussed ways Malaysia and Thailand could co-operate to bring peace to the southern province.

Najib told reporters that while Malaysia was willing to help, it was up to the Thai government to determine the roles Malaysia could play.

He said he had high hopes that Surayud would bring positive changes to southern Thailand.

In Bangkok, AFP reported yes-

terday that the Thai government said it would restore a centre for mediation in its southern provinces, reversing the policy of deposed premier Thaksin.

The former prime minister dismantled the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre, a forum for government officials and security forces to iron out their differences that was credited with curbing unrest in the southern provinces.

General Sondhi Boonyaratkalin, who ousted Thaksin in a coup last month, said a new centre would be set up.