

Thai king backed Mahathir peace talks with rebels

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BANGKOK - Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has held a series of talks with rebel leaders from Muslim-majority southern Thailand under a peace drive backed by Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej, his son said on Tuesday.

The discussions with more than 50 senior members of various guerrilla groups behind the unrest, in which more than 1,700 people have been killed, stretched from the middle of last year to August this year, Mukhriz Mahathir told Reuters.

"This was a series of interviews to try to understand what really are their grievances and grouses and what they want from the Thai government. We discovered that it was not secession they wanted, but really more attention by the Thai government for the south, in particular economic development and education."

The groups represented were all separatist guerrilla groups active in the 1970s and 1980s in the three southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, an independent sultanate until annexed by overwhelmingly Buddhist Thailand a century ago. To this day, 80 percent of the population in the jungle-clad region are Muslim and speak Malay as a first language.

Mukhriz listed them as Bersatu, an umbrella grouping, the Pattani United Liberation Organisation, the Barasi Revolusi Nasional (BRN), or National Revolutionary Front in Malay, and the Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani, or Pattani Islamic Mujahideen Movement. He said he was confident Mahathir's non-governmental Perdana Global Peace Organisation, which initiated the talks, was talking to "presidents and vice presidents" of the groups and had the tacit backing of Kuala Lumpur.

The talks were held on Malaysia's northwestern island of Langkawi, as well as in the nation's administrative capital, Putrajaya, he said. Perdana had passed its findings to General Vaipot Srinual, now head of Thailand's National Intelligence Agency following a Sept. 19 coup against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Vaipot had subsequently made contact with the same people, he said.

Vaipot could not immediately be reached for comment. Perdana had made clear it had done as much as it could, Mukhriz said.

"This is as far as we can go, and we recommend that they pursue it from here onwards, but at the same time we offer ourselves to assist in the effort further," he said, summarising its last letter to the Thai government.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mahathir, 81, was first approached for help by former Thai prime minister Anand Panyarachun when Thaksin made him head of a National Reconciliation Commission.

"Later this request was endorsed by the King in an audience my father had with the King in November last year," Mukhriz said. "It was at that meeting that the King agreed with Anand that Dr. Mahathir should play a role in bringing the two sides together."

Mahathir paid a two-day "private visit" to Thailand that month, during which he met Anand and Thaksin, who many people in the far south cite as the root cause of the problem, not least because of his "iron first" approach. Mukhriz said Thaksin's overthrow could make a real difference to a simmering decades-old problem that blew up in January 2004 with a raid on a military barracks in which four soldiers were killed and hundreds of rifles stolen.

In the days running up to his coup, army chief Sonthi Boonyaratglin -- the mainly Buddhist country's first Muslim military chief -- clashed publicly with Thaksin's administration over the possibility of dialogue with southern rebels. The daily cycle of bombings and shootings has alarmed foreign investors and governments although there is no sign international militant groups such as Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda are involved.

"The statements coming out of the Thai government have been very encouraging, contrasting to what Thaksin's administration was saying particularly in the last four or five months before his downfall," Mukhriz said.