

"Deep South Alternative Media for Peace/Pat(t)ani Festival"
28 Feb 2014
Faculty of Communication Science
Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, PATTANI

Key Note Address by
Dato' Sri AHMAD ZAMZAMIN HASHIM
Facilitator
JWG Peace Dialogue Process on Southern Thailand

**"Peace Dialogue in Pat(t)ani Peace Process:
One Year On and Years Later"**

Assalamualaikum Warahmatullah Hiwabarakatuh,
Sawaadikhap
and a very good Morning.

Learned members of the academia, faculty staff and students of Prince
Songkla University, Pattani Campus,

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, social activists from Civil Societies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First and foremost, allow me to express my sincere appreciation to the
Prince Songkhla University, Pattani Campus, or in short PSU, in
particular to Asst. **Prof. Dr. Srisompob Jitpiromsri**, Director of Deep
South Watch, and the Center for Conflict studies and Cultural Diversity,
PSU, for extending an invitation to me to deliver a key note address at
this esteemed university in conjunction with the Conference organised
by PSU entitled "Deep South Alternative Media for Peace/Pat(t)ani
Festival".

I have been asked to speak on "**Peace Dialogue in Pat(t)ani Peace
Process: One Year on and Years Later**". Frankly when I received the

email, I asked my Secretariat members this simple question: SHOULD I ACCEPT THE INVITATION AND SPEAK, FOR 45 minutes? This was not only because of my own reservations about making public speeches, very much related to my training and work background, but more so because what is there to talk about for 45 minutes? I also felt dwarfed when I realised that the discussants who will be appearing after me to discuss on the issue, i.e. Prof. Duncan McCargo, Prof. Kamaruzaman Askandar, Maj. Gen. Nakrob Boonbuathong, Pol Colonel Tawee Sodsong and Prof. Srisompob Jipiromsri himself are experts on the subject.

After some serious discussions we concluded that there is a need for the Secretariat, particularly the Facilitator, to be directly engaged with various groups on the ground, and therefore decided to make my appearance at PSU an exception. In fact this is my first public lecture on the issue. I hope I will not utilise my entire 45 minutes for the keynote address as I would be more than happy to accept any question after this talk, if time permits.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I proceed further, for purposes of consistency and that we are on the same page of the geographical area that we will be discussing, allow me to borrow the term used by PSU in the invitation letter to me. Instead of using the term South Thailand or Southern Thailand or Deep South to refer to the affected areas of discussion i.e. the provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, I would instead use the term "Pat(t)ani", with the letter second "t" in (brackets) as used in the PSU letter. In this regard over the course of my speech I may use the term "Pat(t)ani" conflict, problem, issue etc interchangeably to refer to our topic of discussion.

When I was first informed sometime in late Dec 2012 by my government that the Prime Minister of Malaysia intended to appoint me as the facilitator for the possible peace dialogue between the Government of Thailand and groups with different opinions in "Pat(t)ani", I accepted it with little hesitation. Not because in need of a job, (for your info, after my official retirement as a civil servant, I was attached to the Malaysian Islamic Dakwah Foundation as its Vice President for Analysis and Research) but for the fact that it was to be given an honour to contribute, may be in a small way, to the issue that has been around for quite sometime.

More importantly, I considered the decision to have the peace dialogue was significant because it is the first of seven Thai governments since 2004 to publicly acknowledged the need for a political solution to the most violent conflict in South East Asia now. It was a brave decision indeed. The BRN's decision to come out of its shadows into the open (at least for some of its representative) was also commendable, indicating that it was willing to finding an amicable solution other than through arm struggle. It was also an honour for Malaysia, and myself to be appointed as its representative, to be the facilitator.

Today is exactly one year to the date the signing of the General Consensus in Kuala Lumpur between the Government of Thailand and the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) representing "those with different opinions". Let me briefly walk through with you what has happened over the last one year. The first formal meeting between the delegation of the Government of Thailand and delegation of people with different opinions, represented by BRN, was held on 5 of Mac 2013 and were followed by three other subsequent meetings. During the first meeting on 5th Mac, the agenda on the table was actually to draft and agree on the Terms of Reference (TOR) on the conduct of the Dialogue. There

were quite a number of issues that were trashed out and agreed upon. Among others, these include the topic of language of the meeting/ dialogue and documentation, representation on each panel to the dialogue etc.

During the next three subsequent dialogue meetings, much of the time were spent on trying to create confidence and understanding on the issue at hand so that everybody was on the same page. I may say here that it was not easy as there was this sense of deep animosity and antagonism between both sides. This was understandable due to the nature and sensitivity of the issues. Almost everybody around the table may have been affected one way or the other by the problem at hand and therefore it was not surprising that each and everyone present may have strong views or became emotional on certain issues discussed. Many points, issues and demands were also brought to the table and some may not be to the likings of the other party.

Since the last official dialogue meeting on 13th June 2014, formal direct discussions were put on hold for a number of reasons. I would consider this situation as an impasse, which is acceptable and understandable. The whole process was to create trust between both parties towards each other because of the sensitivity of issues. Nonetheless despite the impasse, as Facilitator, I have been doing shuttling diplomacy between and consultations with both parties, getting things across to both parties.

Because of this impasse and especially the recent renewed violence in the area concerned, many people have come to the conclusion that the Dialogue Process has failed or abandoned. To me this is not correct. We should understand and accept the fact that this dialogue process is still in an embryonic or early stage. Conflict resolution is a complex

process and depends on a number of factors. What we are seeing here I believe is a temporary suspension of the dialogue. The situation in Bangkok now in a way has further prolonged this impasse. It is understandable that a formal dialogue meeting is not feasible at the moment because of the nature of the caretaker government in Bangkok. But I am optimistic that once the issue in Bangkok is resolved, this dialogue process will proceed.

My optimism is based on a number of factors. I may confess here that it was most encouraging indeed when both parties, despite their differences and disagreements on a number of issues, have given their commitment and assurances to the peace dialogue. This constant communication between the two sides, through the facilitator, helped to ease misunderstandings.

At least during the first two weeks of "The Ramadhan Initiative", a sense of peace was actually established in the area affected. Though it was short lived and bisected with unforeseen obstacles, it proved not only to the people of Thailand but also the whole world that if both parties are committed to peace dialogue, concrete steps to ease the violence and minimise the hardships of the people can be achieved. And no one can deny this fact. It was a very useful experience learned that could be the starting point of future undertakings between both parties.

When The Government of Thailand decided to engage the Barisan Revolusi Nasional or BRN in the dialogue process, there were many who questioned whether this was the right decision. Their arguments against the BRN as the sole representative of the people of the Pat(t)ani, were that there are other groups who are also active in the affected provinces. However I believed the decision by the Government of Thailand why BRN was chosen was with the assumption and thinking

that the BRN is the most formidable and active component as far as the Pat(t)ani issue is concerned and therefore should be given the mandate to lead the voices and interests of the Pat(t)ani people.

I concur with this thinking i.e. the BRN is the strongest and most active components in the Pat(t)ani issue and should be given the mandate to lead the interests. However I have also, right from the start, emphasized on inclusivity i.e. the delegation to be led by BRN should also include as many, if not all, interested parties or stakeholders of Pat(t)ani. I have urged and encouraged the BRN delegation right from the start that it should not only include other "Pejuang" Groups such as PULO, BIPP, MUHAJIDDIN and the rest, but also other stakeholders such as NGOS, Civil Societies, Youth Movements, Women Interests, Religious groups (Both Muslims and non Muslims), Intellectuals and the academia, professional groups and any other party that feels that their views and interests need to be heard and represented. Even though not all will be physically represented in the panel delegation because of the limited prescribed number of the panel itself, but they may allow their interests be represented by other groups. What is important is that as many stakeholders as possible are on board in the delegation that represents the "Pat(t)ani" interest in the dialogue with the Government of Thailand.

In this regard I am pleased to note that the BRN delegation led by Uztaz Hassan Taib was acceptable to the idea and that they indicated they will allocate seats in the panel to other groups and stakeholders. We may even see a change in name of the delegation itself i.e. not just what it is currently known as the "The BRN Delegation" but something to connote that it represents the interests of "Pat(t)ani" to the peace dialogue. What it is, I will leave it to the delegation themselves to decide. As to the exact number of seats to be allocated to each group / faction / stakeholder, it is not for Malaysia to decide and the parties will work out

among themselves. I hope that these groups and stakeholders would be able to meet soon to decide on this and from a panel that really represent Pat(t)ani.

As a first move, I am also pleased to announce that PULO, which currently has three (3) factions have agreed to form a joint working group among themselves to represent PULO's interests in the peace dialogue. The leaders representing the three factions recently signed an agreement known as the "Muharram Declaration" in conjunction with the Muslim month of Muharram, in Kuala Lumpur stating their commitment to join the peace dialogue. I am also pleased to note that another group, the BIPP, has also declared its intention to participate and join the peace dialogue.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Malaysia's appointment as the Facilitator for the Peace Dialogue has not gone down well with certain quarters, with some accusing that Malaysia is not the right intermediary because it has an agenda. Before I proceed in presenting Malaysia's perspective, I would like to reiterate that Malaysia, since the days of former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohammad, embarked on a policy known as "prosper thy neighbour". The emphasis was to cooperate with Malaysia's neighbours so that they would also prosper. This was with the understanding that if the neighbours are prosperous, Malaysia would also benefit. Prosperity however could only be achieved if there is peace and stability.

Malaysia accepts the fact that the "Pat(t)ani" conflict is a domestic issue of Thailand. However by virtue of the fact that the three provinces share the common border with Malaysian states, any instability in the areas will not only have a direct impact on Malaysia's security dimension, but

also other areas of interests, the least being Malaysia's bilateral relations with Thailand. In this regard, Malaysia's interests on this issue may have been on a different perspective if the three afore-mentioned provinces are actually some where else, for example in the north of Thailand at the border with China.

In his keynote address at the symposium on "Islam and the New Era of Asean Countries: Unity of Worldview Towards a Shared Prosperity" at the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia on 4th June 2013, Honorable Prime Minister of Malaysia Dato' Sri Najib Tun Razak urged the indigenous Muslim minorities of the Philippines, Thailand and Myanmar to forget about any idea of independent Muslim states. He said they should instead recognise their responsibilities within their current nation-states and contribute to the moral and socio-economic strengths of their respective nations. He said, these Muslims should be made to understand that they must live under the current national governments and they must eschew violence. On the other hand, he stressed that these minorities also have rights and privileges which should be provided for by the respective governments. It's showed that as an alternative to breakaways meaningful autonomy should be granted upon these Muslim minorities in terms of protecting their religious, linguistic and cultural identity. Dato' Sri Najib's statements clearly refutes any suggestion that Malaysia has the hidden agenda of helping the related provinces to gain independence or separated from Thailand.

On the other hand, Malaysia would like to extend a helping hand and be an honest broker. As a neighbour, we have obligations and responsibilities towards Thailand but we also have our rights and interests that should be taken into consideration by Thailand. Does Malaysia have an agenda? I would certainly say yes. Malaysia's agenda

is to help brokered a comprehensive, just and ever lasting agreement between the Government of Thailand and the affected parties / stakeholders in Pat(t)ani. I would also like to stress here that this comprehensive, just and everlasting peace agreement should not only be for the benefits and interests of the people of Thailand and the affected parties/stakeholders in Pat(t)ani but also that of Malaysia.

Prime Minister Najib used the term “autonomy” as a general reference to a form of administration or governance other than separation to be adopted by the minority groups. Malaysia is willing to assist them in the discussions with their respective governments. However the nature, scope or content of the autonomy or sometimes referred by some as self-rule, is not for Malaysia to decide. In the case of the Pat(t)ani conflict, it depends on the government of Thailand and the Pat(t)ani people to decide. As it is widely known, there are many forms or kinds of “autonomy” being practiced all over the world be it in USA, Australia or even in Malaysia. The soon to be signed peace agreement between the Government of Philippines and the MILF centered on the establishment of a special autonomous region for Mindanao.

Malaysia has also stressed that it is the prerogative of the Government of Thailand and the stakeholders in the affected areas to choose which ever country they would like to help them facilitate in solving the problem. Malaysia's would however put a word of caution that her interests should also be considered in any resolution to the conflict because of the reasons mentioned earlier. At the end of the day, Malaysia will have to review its commitment and cooperation to any peace agreement if it were to conclude that they were against its national interests.

However I would like to stress here that Malaysia is ever ready to play whatever role the parties concerned would like us to be. And we will undertake the responsibility and perform to our utmost ability.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Over the past one year, the path of the Peace Dialogue was bumpy, bisected by numerous problems and obstacles. One of the most fundamental problems that the dialogue faced relates to the level of mistrust between the two parties. On the one hand the Government recognised the BRN as the major component and player in the problem. However they have their doubts as to whether the BRN delegation headed by Uztaz Hassan Taib has the full mandate of the BRN leadership; or whether the BRN itself could actually deliver what they promised in the dialogue process.

The BRN on the other hand, because of the failure of previous secret dialogue attempts with the Government, was also suspicious of the present initiative. They were questioning whether the present initiative was for real; or is it another attempt by the government to misled them and expose these groups into the open.

Secondly, although both parties were talking about and wanting to have peace, each side's view to the process of achieving peace is poles apart. This is what Johan Galtung, the father of peace studies refers in his concept of "Negative Peace vs Positive Peace". The Government's connotation of peace is that the BRN and other groups must cease acts of violence before the Government would concede to their demands. On the other hand the BRN is insisting that the Government must deliver and grant them their demands before they would cease acts of violence. It therefore rests on the shoulder of Malaysia as Facilitator to ensure

that both parties could come to a meeting point where peace could be established.

The other issue at hand was the level of coordination within each party, be it the government or the BRN. Each side seemed to be affected by internal disputes and differences thus making it difficult for them to have uniformity and full commitment in their actions. The incidents that occurred during the Ramadan Initiative proved this point. This further exacerbates the mistrust factor.

The signing of the General Consensus in a way has caught many people by surprise. This was because over the years the Thai Government has denied any link what so ever of any effort at talking or in contact with, borrowing the term used in the General Consensus, with “those of different opinions in the south”. Thus when it was made public of the historic signing of the General Consensus, it has forced the whole issue into a new dimension. It suddenly became the focus of attention not only by the people of Thailand but also the international community.

Suddenly expectations from both sides of the isle became very high, not only from those who are directly involved and affected by the conflict but also other interested parties who do not want to see the conflict resolved for whatever reason it may be. It has led to unnecessary pressure on both sides to make significant achievements quickly. Many have expressed pessimism right from the start and predicted that the process would doom to failure. Thus any glitches by the two sides to come to any understanding or make significant progress were quickly interpreted as a failure, especially when the developments on the ground were not helping either.

Let me reemphasized here that the whole process is still at a very early stage. In the case of the Government of Philippine-MILF Peace Process, it was actually initially known as Informal Talks, took many years before the information on the process was even made public. Very few information, particularly through press conferences by both parties involved, were leaked to the public. The first formal press conference by the Facilitator of the Mindanao Peace Process was only done in 2006, 5 years after it officially started in 2001. This gave the process the much needed secrecy and peace of mind to really sit down to create an environment of understanding between each other and eventually to discuss and negotiate without being scrutinized by the public, particularly by the media.

This is the privileged that the current peace dialogue does not have. Instead much “negotiation” or debate were carried in public, not necessarily by the two parties but others who feel that they have every right to speak or voice their views on the issue. More often than not, many of the so-called information or facts that were presented in the debate were inaccurate or misinformation which has created further confusion and cleavages among the stakeholders themselves and the general public.

A case in point, interestingly enough, there were two articles in the two major English papers in Thailand yesterday on this topic. One termed the present initiative as “fresh attempt to revive the corpse” – very strong words indeed; while the other, written by non-other than Prof. Sisomphob, looked at the whole process in an entirely different perspective. As a foreigner, it never failed me but to notice the inclination of these two papers themselves towards the peace dialogue process.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Despite these differences and difficulties, I am glad to note and mentioned here that both parties have expressed their commitment towards the peace dialogue process. The developments in Bangkok may have temporarily hindered the peace dialogue process to continue at the official level. No formal talks between the two parties could be held because of the temporary status of the caretaker government.

The dialogue has proven that despite the differences in their positions on various issues, the two parties can work for the betterment of the Pat(t)ani people if there is a will. The cynicism expressed by many on the Ramadhan Initiative aside, do we in our widest dream ever thought that the BRN and the Government could have come to an agreement to cease hostilities, even for just a short period of time?

Another important aspect of the peace dialogue process is that the issue at hand has gained great interests from the general public, not only in the three affected provinces but also the general Thai populace. The issues affected the so-called “Pat(t)ani Malays” are now being discussed openly in many forums, creating greater awareness among the general populace of what the problem is all about and on the need to address the problem comprehensively. The active involvement and participation of numerous NGOs, Civil societies, intellectuals, youth movements etc from the three provinces in the discussions and open debates are really encouraging. They give a strong impression and signal that the issue at hand is not only the privileged or monopoly of those taking up armed struggle but every citizen of the Pat(t)ani area.

It really saddened me to note the increase in incidents of violence over the past few weeks, especially as it involved soft targets, namely

women, children and the elderly. We at the Secretariat would strive towards the establishment and creation of an atmosphere of calm and sense of personal safety. As in the case of the Mindanao Peace Process has shown, the stakeholders will not support any peace effort if they do not feel safe to work and earn a living or to do any daily activity.

The reduction, or its total eradication, of violence in the Pat(t)ani conflict by all parties could only be done if both parties, if not all, agree to stop using violence as a means of achieving whatever agenda they may have. This cessation fire of hostilities may only be done if there is a ceasefire, either partial or full-fledged. I may confide here that the Secretariat had initially drawn a draft “Roadmap of the Peace Dialogue Process”. Because of the positive nature and developments at the initial stages of the peace dialogue, the Secretariat was quite optimistic of pushing for a ceasefire agreement by 2015. However, realistically, because of the numerous development and present circumstances, we have to review the draft Roadmap.

Nonetheless, a meaningful ceasefire could only be achieved if the two parties are able to meet and work out the terms of reference. However the core focus of our efforts in the immediate future is to work for a ceasefire and end of hostilities.

At the same time, because of the uncertainty in Bangkok, the Peace Dialogue Secretariat feels that there is a need to embark on a program to get engaged with the Stakeholders through meetings, seminars and the like. The stakeholders need to be briefed and informed on the dynamics of the peace dialogue and to harness their support for the process. We would like also to encourage the BRN to meet and discuss with other stakeholders on the agenda to be brought to the negotiating table so that the views of others are represented. This will also allow

them to discuss and agree on the issue of representation in the panel delegation.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Before I conclude I would like to emphasize that I consider the present status of the peace dialogue process as just an impasse. I strongly believe that whichever Government to be formed with the full mandate of the people would not abandon the peace dialogue. This is because of the realisation by the administration of the need to have a comprehensive political solution to the problem instead of just emphasizing on other aspects be it economic or military. What were achieved over the short period of time, however limited it may be, indicated that the dialogue process would have to form the basis of a meaningful and comprehensive solution to the Pat(t)ani conflict.

Wassalamualaikum and Thank You.