

Shoring up peace efforts

No short cuts to ending the strife in southern Thailand

WITH rubber prices having fallen by about 30 per cent this year, it was natural that when the leaders of the world's largest rubber producers meet, measures to stabilise prices would be on the agenda.

So, it was no surprise that the plan to develop the rubber industry on the Kedah-Thai border came up when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak talked to his Thai counterpart, Yingluck Shinawatra, in Vladivostok, Russia, on Saturday. Certainly, with the decline in demand because of the global economic slowdown, things are bad for rubber growers. But, then again, not too long ago in February, they were reaping the windfall from record high prices. On Friday, at any rate, the price rose following the decision by Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia to slash exports and cut old trees.

But as worrying as the fall in the price of rubber was, it was undoubtedly the continued volatility in the rubber-growing south that dominated the conversation on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation's Leaders Summit. The Malaysian response, as reiterated by the prime minister in Vladivostok, is to continue to assist Thailand in seeking a solution to the strife in the south. This includes helping with the economic development of Thailand's southern provinces, which is where rubber comes in, as it has been identified as one of the six potential areas for joint development.

Interestingly, on Friday, too, former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is leading the study on the "Rubber City", spoke at a seminar at the Prince of Songkla University in Hat Yai, which was organised by civil society groups to launch the "Patani Peace Process". And so did former Thai prime minister and present opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva. Last month, the Thai government admitted to holding informal talks with insurgent groups. Also on Friday, one of the Thai deputy prime ministers, Chalerm Yubamrung, floated the idea of elected governors and limited autonomy for the south.

So, as there are two tracks of talks and the idea of autonomy is back on the agenda, the prospects for a political solution to the long-running conflict do not appear to be too bleak. But, then again, as the military has been talking to the insurgents for decades and the talk of autonomy is

not new, talk of peace would be premature. Shoring up rubber prices by cutting supply is one thing. But, as the recent surge of attacks in the south underscores, there are no short cuts to ending the violence. Nevertheless, talking would be a good start, as would a degree of autonomy.