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# Peace call for Ramadan

**T**he government peace talks delegation heads to Kuala Lumpur tomorrow for the third formal meeting with the political leaders of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). Expectations are low.

After a very brief surge of optimism when the government agreed to talk to the militant group in February, there is now general disappointment. This may be why hundreds of Muslim leaders called unanimously on Sunday for a show of goodwill from the separatists.

The 634 Islamic imams — each of whom leads a mosque — seemed to grasp the purpose of the peace talks better than the government's official negotiators.

They suggested that Lt Gen Paradorn Pattanabutra, head of the government team at the talks, make a specific proposal to the BRN.

The imams want to test the BRN's goodwill and authority in a direct way. They called for a ceasefire — "an end to all forms of violence" — during the fasting month of Ramadan, which begins about July 8.

Lt Gen Paradorn should grasp this advice firmly. It is a genuine demand from grassroots leaders of the deep South. In fact, it is the first such major proposal to come from the embattled region in a very long time.

If the Thai delegation takes this suggestion into the peace talks and puts it to BRN leaders, it will finally take

the government side off the backfoot at the peace talks.

There is little doubt that Lt Gen Paradorn and his delegation have struggled to gain credibility at the Kuala Lumpur peace talks.

A widely quoted Bangkok Poll found that, by a wide margin, southerners believe the militants have gained the political advantage over the government. This in the deep South also believe violence has increased since the talks began. This is ominous, since the BRN negotiators, from delegation chief Hassan Taib down, claim they can control the level of violence in the region.

So tomorrow, with the unanimous backing of imams in the region, the government delegation can test this claim. Mr Hassan can agree to a month-long Ramadan ceasefire and, if it occurs, he will establish his own credentials as head of the militant group.

Or of course, he can dismiss the demand for a peaceful Ramadan. This would, however, increase present scepticism that he and his Malaysian assistants have any influence over the shadowy terrorists and insurgents actually conducting the daily shootings, assassinations and bomb attacks.

Since the February agreement to talk about peace, the BRN has conducted a strong, even clever propaganda war. Using social media including YouTube, Mr Hassan and his subordinates have avoided all current issues, while flailing "Siamese imperialism" for "hundreds of years" of alleged abuses. The government has been caught napping, unable or unwilling to produce responses to these BRN attacks.

The imams have provided both a moral demand to the BRN, and an opportunity for Lt Gen Paradorn and his negotiators. Unlike the BRN's sweeping demands such as an end to all arrests, the Ramadan proposal is focused, easy to understand, uncomplicated to implement and simple for people in the South to judge.

It is telling that the Ramadan peace proposal came from imams in the deep South. People in that region understand the needs of the current situation. The Islamic leaders deserve praise for seizing the chance to provide excellent advice to the government, while serving the aspirations of all local people.