

# Arroyo visit puts ties with **KL** back on track

News analysis by

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BEFORE her visit to Kuala Lumpur, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said she would personally thank Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for Malaysia's help in brokering peace in the southern Philippines.

She did just that on Tuesday.

Her first words to the Prime Minister during their bilateral meeting at Putrajaya were "thank you for the peace efforts."

The president also did not forget to pay a glowing tribute to Dr Mahathir's 20 years in office and an advance National Day congratulatory message.

An official said: "She is a very firm person but she just hit it off with Malaysian leaders.

"She let the Prime Minister know that she admires him, saying things like he is a brother and role model for her."

Arroyo's visit is a scoop for Malaysia as this is her first overseas trip since taking over power early this year.

The fact that Malaysia is her first choice is very significant, according to another official.

"The relationship is on the right track. It will blossom under Arroyo's leadership," the official said, adding that it was back to the days when Malaysia had similar friendly ties under the leadership of President Fidel Ramos.

In fact, officials said Arroyo had directed her people to start work for a state visit by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah.

She also extended an open invitation to Dr Mahathir to make an official visit to Ma-

nila, one that Dr Mahathir has accepted.

"The president is very happy and pleased. She gets to explain the situation on the ground and meets businessmen in the hope that they will invest in her country," the official added.

In her endeavour to strengthen ties between the two countries and build a closer rapport with Dr Mahathir, Arroyo even went to the extent of saying that if it displeased him for her to meet Parti Keadilan Nasional president Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, she would not do so.

"If he gave so much as a hint he would not be happy, I would not go through with it," Arroyo said before departing for home on Thursday.

Arroyo's ousted predecessor Joseph Estrada had upset the Malaysian government when he met Dr Wan Azizah, a move seen by Kuala Lumpur as interfering in Malaysia's domestic affairs.

An official said Arroyo did not want to jeopardise her visit when she knew that she would gain so much more by being a friendly neighbour.

Looking at things, officials said, Arroyo seemed sincere in wanting to build stronger relations with Malaysia, especially when her country needs investment from Malaysia to develop southern Philippines.

It was a bonus that her trip coincided with the signing of a set of guidelines between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and her government to end hostilities in the southern Philippines.

"Arroyo's agenda is very clear, she wants to eradicate poverty and bring progress in the southern Philippines. For that she needs peace.

"At the same time Malaysia

believes in being a good neighbour since there were suspicions that Malaysia was helping the rebels.

"Just like Manila, Kuala Lumpur wants peace. A quiet neighbourhood means only good things for the region, we see less exodus of Filipinos coming over and less trouble," said an official.

"Her direction is very clear. She has repeatedly said that Manila is committed towards developing the Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines East Asean Growth Area.

"Mindanao is part of this area which has been troubled with rebel problems. Peace is an integral issue, otherwise the development agenda cannot be implemented."

Malaysian investors used to invest heavily in the Philippines before the 1997 financial crisis and perceptions that bilateral relations had become rocky during Estrada's rule made them stay away.

"Now Arroyo wants Malaysian investors to take another look at Philippines as an investment place.

"In fact, the government is looking for investors in oil palm plantations in the southern Philippines involving 160,000ha of land.

If before her coming to power the relationship was "cloudy" and lacking warmth, Arroyo has struck the right cord with Dr Mahathir.

Arroyo adopted a "theme" for her Malaysian visit.

"I have adopted the vision of making Philippines and Malaysia partners for peace and prosperity," Arroyo said in a statement issued just before departing for Kuala Lumpur.

And she may have achieved just that during her three-day stay.