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Arroyo expected to visit Malaysia early next month

Tony Emmanuel in Hanoi

PHILIPPINES President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo will kick off her official visit to the region by calling on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in early August.

Confirming the visit, a Philippine Foreign Ministry official said focus of the visit would be enhancing bilateral relations and economic co-operation.

Asked why was Malaysia the first choice of destination, the official replied: "That's obvious ... Malaysia plays an important role in regional development and the Arroyo administration would like to see continuity in bilateral ties."

The visit follows the recent visit by Philippines Vice-President Teofisto Guingona.

The two-day visit has been described to be a sincere effort to bring closer the two countries, which had undergone numerous hiccups during former President Joseph Estrada's tenure.

"At present we are looking at Aug 7 but are awaiting confirmation from Wisma Putra," the official added.

Meanwhile Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar told reporters here the dates have been set and the details would be disclosed by the end of the week.

Malaysia-Philippines relations reached an all time high during President Fidel Ramos' tenure and this was clearly evident with Malaysia becoming the biggest investor, with Proton and Petronas, taking the lead.

However, this took an "about turn" when Estrada assumed office in 1998.

Arroyo's visit is the first since she assumed office last January after a people revolt resulted in Estrada's ouster.

During the visit, Arroyo is expected to extend an invitation to Malaysian companies to participate in bidding for the Philippine Armed Forces modernisation programme.

The Philippine President had promised the Republic's Armed Forces a RM1 billion allocation this year for acquisition and upgrading.

At present, Malaysia's Airod has already secured contracts for the maintenance of the Philippines Air Force's C130 transporters.

After her visit to Malaysia, Arroyo is scheduled to visit Brunei and Singapore. In September, she is scheduled to visit Japan followed by a trip to China in October.