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Arroyo-Preview

ARROYO'S VISIT OFFERS HOPE FOR BETTER MANILA-KL TIES

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 6 (Bernama) -- Philippine President Gloria Arroyo arrives here tomorrow to begin a three-day visit aimed at putting relations between Manila and Kuala Lumpur on a stronger footing.

This will be her first trip abroad since assuming the presidency of the nation of some 74 million people on the back of so-called "People Power II" early this year, replacing former President Joseph Estrada.

In interviews accorded to the media days before her departure for Kuala Lumpur, the petite president reportedly said that it was her intention to express gratitude to Malaysia, particularly Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, for contributions to efforts to bring peace and development to Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

Malaysia has brokered two sets of peace talks -- the first relating to uniting the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and its splinter group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the second involving peace negotiations between the MILF and the Philippine government.

A unity agreement is set to be signed between the MILF and MNLF during Arroyo's visit, a move that Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak recently described as one that would mark a new beginning for the Moro people. The Muslim in the southern Philippines are known as the Moro people.

On the other hand, Manila is trying to contain the Abu Sayyaf group, also operating in the southern Philippines, who had reportedly kidnapped and beheaded several Filipinos in recent days.

Military cooperation between Manila and Kuala Lumpur has been enhanced following the kidnapping of Malaysians and foreign tourists from the Malaysian island resort of Sipadan last year by members of the Abu Sayyaf.

Arroyo's trip is also seen as a sincere attempt to improve the rough patch in Manila-Kuala Lumpur ties during the Estrada period stemming from his criticism over Malaysia's handling of the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim issue.

On this matter, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said the episode should be "a thing of the past, let it remain in the past".

He said: "We want to move forward the relationship with the Philippines under Arroyo and I believe that she is open to this...the contact between her government and ours has been very good."

Enhancing economic and trade cooperation between the two countries is also on Arroyo's mind for judging from the programme of her visit, a substantial portion is devoted to business meetings and dialogues between members of the business communities from both sides.

The Philippines will also be discussing with Malaysia ways to revive the Brunei/Indonesia/Malaysia/Philippines-East Asean Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA).

Malaysia is surely looking forward to Arroyo's visit for it would like to understand the recent move by Manila to intervene in the territorial dispute over Sipadan and Ligitan islands between Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta.

-- BERNAMA

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