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Arroyo shows respect for our leadership

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THE relations between two countries is usually symbolised by the closeness of the respective leaders. When leaders trust each other, issues can be discussed openly and solutions could be easily arrived at.

By choosing Malaysia as the first foreign nation to visit since assuming the Philippine presidency, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has indicated to the world that she not only has much respect for the Malaysian leadership but she also counts on our country as a friend.

Having ascertained the past contributions of other nations including neighbours and former colonial powers, she must have come to the conclusion that closer ties with Malaysia would not only be a boon for her nation but there is much scope for symbiotic benefits.

Malaysia's hand in bringing about an agreement between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the announcement that a cordial resolution to Philippines' claim on Sabah was close at hand are major milestones during Arroyo's visit.

Arroyo's admiration of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is obvious when she said she liked his "plain talking and common sense" and that she held in high esteem his "right blend of pragmatism, vision and management capability".

"I am very much like that too. For instance, I don't want fluffy agreements. That's the same thing that Dr Mahathir wants. He said he doesn't want a memorandum of understanding, he wants a memorandum of agreement, at the very least.

"And of course, he has been a brother to us, a brother to me, in helping out to bring the peace process as far as it has gone in this particular visit," she said before returning home.

There is much optimism among the two delegations that were involved in bilateral discussions that the relations between the countries are expected to reach a higher plane.

Tourism growth between the two countries has much potential and the presence of Philippine Tourism Secretary Richard Gordon in the visiting delegation is proof of the importance Manila placed in increasing cross-border travels.

Despite his hectic schedule of attending official functions, Gordon took the time to hold discussions with entrepreneurs and tour operators to improve tourist landings in the Philippines.

He also announced that a Malaysian company would be introducing regular charter flights from Malaysia and China to the Philippines.

Twice-weekly flights from Kota Kinabalu will land at Clark airbase, while the company will also operate two flights a week from Shanghai to Clark airbase and Shenzhen to Cebu.

He said this showed that Malaysian companies are well aware of the tourism potential in the Philippines and added that he and his Malaysian counterpart Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir had signed an agreement to hold joint promotions.

"We can market both countries together and this would bring all-round benefits. We are establishing a committee to study this," he added.

As for Mindanao, he said, since assuming the Tourism Secretary's post, one of his visions was to turn the southern islands into tourist attractions and he believed that in view of the cultural similarities Malaysians would be keen to visit historical and interesting sights there.

As Gordon smoked his favourite cigar at the lounge of the Shangri-La hotel while I sipped on the cold Carlsberg, our discussion ranged from my first meeting with him over 10 years ago when he was head of the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority, my interview after he was removed from office by former President Joseph Estrada and our discussion early this year at Malacanang palace after he was sworn in as Tourism Secretary.

He told Arroyo's Press secretary Noel Cabrera, who joined us at the lounge, how I kept popping up at Subic Bay when he was "unemployed" to find out about his future plans which brought laughter all around and we expressed happiness that the "come back kid" is back in the hot seat.

Since NST editorial adviser Tan Sri Abdul Samad Ismail (Pak Samad to us all) had told me to find a way to travel to Mindanao and Basilan to report on the actual situation and ensure that I do not return by cargo, I decided this was an opportune time to pop the question.

"Could you help in arranging my travel to Mindanao and the neighbouring islands to gain first-hand information on the situation there and also to write about the people and places?" I asked.

He laughed and said: "I will get my top people to guide you there. I will even send a battalion of soldiers to escort you but that is not necessary because the situation has improved considerably. The Abu Sayyaf has been cornered and they cannot escape this time."

He rattled on a few "useful" telephone numbers and also introduced me to Dr Parouk Hussin, who was in Malaysia to negotiate a peace process with the MILF.

Parouk promised to handle the logistics to visit some of the islands off Mindanao.

Gordon said he would need a couple of weeks to organise the itinerary and all I had to do is lug my laptop and fly to the Philippines. I sat there with a huge smile on my face. Another dream assignment. A visit to a troubled spot and the opportunity to meet a host of people... need I want more?