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Arroyo-Tribute

DR MAHATHIR IS A BROKER OF PEACE, SAYS PRESIDENT ARROYO

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 8 (Bernama) -- President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo today paid a glowing tribute to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, calling him "a brother and a peacemaker" who helps to foster closer relations between Christians and Muslims in her country.

"Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will always be remembered as a broker of peace and a brother who has helped close many fissures between Christians and Muslims in the Philippines," she said.

In her remarks prior to taking questions from the floor at a news conference on the second of her three-day State visit here, she thanked the prime minister for what he had done to move the visit from beyond just a ceremony to a meaningful step in the Philippine's journey towards lasting peace and prosperity.

"Dr Mahathir is a model of a right blend of pragmatism, vision and, most importantly, the enlightened management of human diversity. These traits telescope the primary theme of my visit which is peace," she said.

In conjunction with the visit, two peace documents were signed in Putrajaya yesterday, one relating to the mechanism to implement a ceasefire accord between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the other, a unity agreement between the MILF and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

Both organisations claim to represent the interests of some five million Muslims in Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

Arroyo said that unfortunately, the southern Philippine region was still facing the threat of the Abu Sayyaf rebels but vowed that they would eventually be wiped out.

"I thank the leaders of Malaysia for encouraging me in the strong stand that I have taken for the government not to pay ransom. It is only a matter of time before we finally rescue the rest of the hostages and rout this barbaric horde.

"This is not a promise. This is a commitment," she said, in reference to the group which has taken several groups as hostages, including more than 20 Malaysians and foreigners from the island resorts of Sipadan and Pandanan off Sabah last year.

The Abu Sayyaf have also reportedly beheaded several of their hostages taken from towns and villages in the southern Philippines recently.

On the government offensive to flush out the rebels, she said: "I've decided that this time we bite the bullet once and for all with the government refusing to negotiate for ransom.

"(We have to) neutralise the enemy once and for all so that the rest of the time we can have peace and order on a sustained basis."

On her trip to Malaysia, Arroyo said it had met and even surpassed her expectations, especially with the signing of the two peace pacts.

"I was not expecting any peace agreements to be signed regarding the peace process. What's important is that there is peace and development on the ground so that our Muslim brothers will finally be much better off being in the mainstream rather than outside seeking secession," she added.

Arroyo also thanked the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Shah, for inviting her to make the state visit and the hospitality accorded her and the Philippine delegation.

On another matter, she said more and more of her government's foreign policy decisions were made in the context of Asean.

The president said she would be visiting other Asean countries in the coming weeks and months to re-assert common bonds and to establish new grounds for cooperation.

On the subject of Filipino workers in Malaysia, Arroyo was happy that more than half a million of them had found gainful employment.

"Other than those who have entered the country illegally, I am happy to note that by and large we don't have serious problems with the Malaysian government or Malaysian employers," she said.

She said these workers were important for the Philippine economy "and I trust that they will be kept in employment in your plantations, factories and homes."

Turning to cooperation in tourism, she said the signing of a tourism pact between the two countries would increase tourism activities.

Earlier, when delivering a keynote address at the Malaysia-Philippines Business Forum, Arroyo said the economic growth and development of Mindanao would be a key part of the country's national agenda.

She said Manila appreciated Malaysian interest in the economic development of Mindanao, especially towards contributing to the economic upliftment of Muslim Filipinos.

"We hope that together we can tap the many business opportunities in Mindanao, provide jobs and increase economic welfare of the people concerned," she said.

-- BERNAMA

MAM NZ AHH JK