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Arroyo-Talks

KL, MANILA AGREE TO CURB CROSS-BORDER CRIME

PUTRAJAYA, Aug 7 (Bernama) -- Malaysia and the Philippines today agreed to strengthen cooperation to curb cross-border crime such as piracies and kidnappings in their territorial waters.

This would be done through speedy channelling of information and increased maritime operations, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar told reporters after emerging from bilateral talks between the two countries at the prime minister's department here.

Visiting Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad headed their countries' delegations at the talks, held on the first day of Arroyo's three-day visit to Malaysia.

Malaysia was the scene of two kidnappings of 24 mainly foreign tourists from two islands off Sabah by the Abu Sayyaf gunmen from Southern Philippines last year, underscoring the decades-old problem of piracies in the waters straddling both countries.

Syed Hamid said at the talks, Kuala Lumpur and Manila also agreed to beef up cooperation in other areas such as energy, agriculture, tourism and trade.

He said both countries would also convene their next Joint Commission meeting which was last hosted by Manila.

On trade he said: " Trade figures between us for the year 2000 stood at RM14.2 billion, this certainly can be improved".

Syed Hamid said the Philippines would also like to see more Malaysian investments including in the Brunei-Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines- East Asean (Bimp-Eaga) growth area, involving sectors such as sugar plantations.

Elaborating on the matter, he said other areas of possible cooperation in the BIMP-EAGA are the construction of gas pipeline from Sabah to the Philippines, Islamic banking and fishing.

In addition, Syed Hamid said there was a need for the two countries to harmonise laws and procedures to attract investments into the respective countries.

Malaysia and the Philippines also signed a memorandum of understanding to boost tourism whereby a working group would be established to identify specific areas for cooperation.

On the subject of Philippine illegal immigrants in Malaysia, Syed Hamid said both sides pledged to work together on this issue and that "ultimately, we would like to see them go back to the Philippines."

He said what the Philippines wanted was that once Malaysian authorities had done proper documentation for the illegals, Kuala Lumpur could send them back to their home country without the need for them to go through the court process.

"But these people are willing to go back provided they have jobs on the other side. That is why there's a need for cooperation between both countries," he said.

Syed Hamid said Manila thanked Malaysian authorities for conducting legalisation exercise resulting in the issuance of legal travel documents for 60,000 illegal Filipinos.

He also said Arroyo expressed gratitude to Dr Mahathir for Malaysia's contribution in the peace process involving the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government and the other relating to the reconciliation of MILF and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

Prior to the bilateral talks, Manila and the MILF signed a document containing guidelines on the implementation of a ceasefire accord agreed earlier in Tripoli, Libya last June while the MILF and MNLF officially inked a unity agreement.

At the signing ceremony of the two agreements, Syed Hamid said Malaysia would continue to be supportive and was willing to facilitate future negotiations between the parties involved.

Meanwhile, the minister did not rule out the possibility of Dr Mahathir visiting Manila to reciprocate Arroyo's trip here.

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