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Arroyo-Peace

MAKE PEACE ACCORD WORK FOR THE SAKE OF MINDANAO, SAYS ARROYO

By: Muin Abdul Majid

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 9 (Bernama) -- Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said today that all the parties involved must ensure that the ceasefire accord in Mindanao translates into peace and development on the ground.

"I don't believe in signing papers for the sake of signing papers, we must make this ceasefire work and we must use this to have development. I don't believe in the syndrome of signing, signing, signing. Let's work on the ground," she said during a special interview with selected members of the media here prior to her departure for Davao after a three-day state visit to Malaysia.

Arroyo was asked about her impression on the signing of two peace documents during her visit, one relating to the implementation of the ceasefire pact between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the other, a unity accord between the MILF and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

The two groups are representing the interest of five million minority Muslims in Mindanao, a region in the southern Philippines which has seen decades of conflict resulting in hardship for the people.

The Manila/MILF pact, among others, calls for the setting up of a coordinating committee for the cessation of hostilities that would be empowered to investigate violations of the ceasefire and recommend punitive action against any violaters.

On the Abu Sayyaf rebels, also operating in southern Philippines and notorious for their kidnapping sprees, Arroyo ruled out any negotiation for ransom with them.

However, she said: "Negotiating for coming into the fold of the law, that's all right."

Abu Sayyaf gunmen have kidnapped several groups of people since last year, including Malaysians and other foreigners from two Malaysian resort islands off eastern Sabah.

On the perception that the Philippines was beset with high crime rates, Arroyo said law enforcement in her country had been stepped up with a high solution rate of crime, including kidnappings, than during the previous administration.

Turning to her presidency, Arroyo said she wanted to be a good president and spoke warmly of her father, former President Diosdado Macapagal, whom she described as her model for governance.

"He's my role model in agenda setting and in governance. And in the work that I do, I've always guided myself by what he said, 'do what is right, do your best and let God take care of the rest'", she said.

On the other hand, Arroyo brushed aside suggestions that coming to power on the back of so-called "people power" was becoming a permanent feature of democracy in the Philippines.

The petite leader replaced Joseph Estrada in January following calls by Filipinos for him to resign stemming from his alleged involvement in graft scandals.

When asked whether she would be running for president in 2004, she said: "I am eligible."

On whether becoming a president had changed her life dramatically, she said: "My life has always been simple even when I was a president's daughter. It's the lifestyle of the government that has changed."

Arroyo said she admired Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for his "plain talking and common sense".

"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."

She held in high esteem Dr Mahathir's "right blend of pragmatism, vision and management capability".

"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.

Touching on the subject of economy and finance, Arroyo said she could not rule out the possibility of Manila imposing a fixed exchange rate.

"I can't rule that out. I don't envision it but I don't want to rule it out, a la Mahathir," she said.

Arroyo said she believed the fundamental value of the Philippine peso to be around 50 pesos to the dollar.

She said measures were also being taken, such as administrative and legislative reforms, to enable the capital market play a bigger part in the Philippine economy.

On steps taken by her government to improve the lot of women, she said it would be done basically through economic empowerment, particularly via the propagation of microfinance.

"We want to enrol a million women in our microfinance programme," she said.

Turning to the topic of Asean, Arroyo said Manila believed in the principle of non-intervention and that any assistance should be rendered in the spirit of brotherhood.

Arroyo also said she and President Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia had a special family bond as their fathers had been very good friends.

"They were like brothers. And she and I have expressed to each other that we want to continue that friendship into our generation," she said.

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