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Pushing for more peaceful S-E Asia

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MALAYSIA'S leading role in bringing about an agreement between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front recently was a major milestone in the nation's continuing efforts to contribute to a more peaceful and stable Southeast Asia.

Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who visited Malaysia this month, was thankful to Malaysia and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in bringing about a settlement which would foster hope and stability to Mindanao, especially for the five million minority Muslims there.

The large Press delegation, including several editors, who arrived with Arroyo gave an insight to the New Straits Times on the events that led to the signing of the agreement.

Arroyo, as early as November last year when she was still Vice-President, had sent an emissary to meet Dr Mahathir urging him to play a role in settling the uneasy peace in Mindanao.

Towards the end of the year, she sent three letters to the Prime Minister where she admitted that economic development was the key to lift Muslim Mindanao out of war.

At the time, on the orders of President Joseph Estrada, the military had already taken over the major camps of the MILF in his policy to crush the rebellion with military might.

When Estrada was ousted from power in January this year following reports of corruption and economic plunder, Arroyo who assumed the presidency, initiated exchange of visits between Malaysian and Philippine representatives to discuss and find a solution to the Mindanao problem, and also ordered cessation of hostilities against the MILF and the lifting of arrest orders against their leaders.

The detailed groundwork for the historic meeting between MILF leaders and Philippine officials in Kuala Lumpur in March was established, shielded from the media's glare.

At the Cyberview Lodge in Cyberjaya, the opposing sides came face-to-face and after a few hours of meetings spread over two days (March 23 and 24), they agreed to resume talks and to draw up common principles that would guide the stalled peace negotiations.

After an agreement was signed in late March, Dr Mahathir spoke with the MILF panel for 40 minutes and his message to the leaders was stunningly clear - final peace can only be achieved through a political settlement and assured them of Malaysia's assistance to needy Muslims and of investment pledges to Mindanao.

On Aug 7, the day of Arroyo's arrival in Kuala Lumpur, both sides signed a set of guidelines for the Cessation of Hostilities in the region. The Malaysia-Libya brokered agreement, on implementing guidelines on the security aspect between the Philippines and the MILF, was signed before Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

At the end of the visit, Arroyo said she admired Dr Mahathir for his "plain talking and common sense" and added: "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".

During the year, many foreign leaders visited Malaysia and among the prominent ones were Cuban president Fidel Castro, Colombian president Andres Pastrana and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Dr Mahathir and Castro share a common distaste of attempts by the West to impose itself on developing countries through means such as globalisation and Castro, during his speech, said the proposed free trade area of the Americas, if materialised, was tantamount to the annexation of poor Latin American countries to the powerful United States.

His defiance towards the US was clearly visible when he challenged a small group of journalists who ambushed him after the lecture to name any other country that was not dependent on the US for survival.

He also expressed admiration of Dr Mahathir's courage to "rebel" against an unjust international system as he endeavoured to bring Malaysia forward.

Pastrana said he was determined to turn his nation - known to most for its illicit cocaine production and insurgencies - into a force to be reckoned with in the new millennium.

"Malaysia for us is a country from which we can learn a lot. You have a history similar to us ... a history of violence in your country, and now you are one of the economic tigers ... one of the most powerful economies.

"I think we have many things to learn from you, especially in agriculture. We have land similar to yours and there is a big possibility of strengthening relations through the oil palm industry."

Vajpayee said his visit to Malaysia would help rejuvenate relations between the two countries which had become "rather static" in recent years and added that his tour of Malaysia was also a reaffirmation of India's Look East policy, with a special focus on countries in the Asean region.

The Times of India, the country's largest-selling newspaper, quoted Vajpayee as saying the visit had given new impetus to bilateral ties, which had lacked momentum in the last few years.

United Nations special envoy Tan Sri Razali Ismail has been busy visiting Yangon in his efforts to get the military junta to engage in talks with Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

UN secretary-general Kofi Annan had announced that there has been breakthrough in talks with the ruling Myanmar Government and substantive discussions may begin as early as this year.

Razali's visits has also helped in the release of several political prisoners from Yangon jails which have been hailed by many international organisations as a step in the right direction to bring about democratic changes within Myanmar.

Malaysia is the sixth largest investor in Myanmar with more than RM2.26 billion committed to 26 projects over the last decade and it has considerable economic potential as well as being endowed with natural resources.

Dr Mahathir's jet-setting ways to strengthen bilateral relations and enhance trade have brought him to many countries around the world.

His policy of "enriching thy neighbour" has already been adopted by many nations while his strong views on globalisation and the direction of the World Trade Organisation has set the pace for other countries to follow.

In Japan, Dr Mahathir is revered as an outspoken Prime Minister, and during his visit this year to Osaka, he found himself being hailed as a celebrated author.

Barely two years after his book "A New Deal for Asia" was translated and published in Japanese, "A Message to Japan" hit the stands. It contains articles written when Asia was on the road to recovery from the currency crisis that hit most of the economies in the region in 1997.

This month, he visited Yemen and Uganda in a bid to open up more avenues for future co-operation and enhancing economic linkages.

As Malaysia celebrates its 44th anniversary of independence, it can be proud of its past achievements in the international arena and will

continue to play a role in helping to highlight the need to bring about a just and equitable world order that would benefit a wider spectrum of nations around the world.