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Stronger KL-Manila ties on Arroyo's agenda

Ashraf Abdullah; Tony Emmanuel in Manila

PRESIDENT Gloria Arroyo is expected to call for enhanced to call for enhanced co-operation between Malaysia and the Philippines to further develop the country's health, education and tourism during her State visit next week.

In line with her Government's efforts to eradicate poverty, Arroyo will seek Malaysia's assistance in these sectors, which could help social and economic development in the Philippines.

The State visit to Malaysia is the President's first following her appointment to the Executive Office at the landmark Edsa Shrine last January. It is also a historic visit of sorts as it is the first by a Philippines' head of State since Fidel Ramos's in 1993.

Arroyo who is scheduled to arrive in Kuala Lumpur for the three-day visit on Tuesday, will be accompanied by her husband First Gentleman Jose Miguel Arroyo and a 90-member Government and business delegation.

During a meeting with the diplomatic community soon after her appointment, Arroyo then assured those present she would begin her visit to Asean neighbours six months later.

"Six months was what she needed to get her house in order," a Department of Foreign Affairs official told the New Straits Times.

"The Arroyo Administration has high regards for Malaysia's co-operation and its leadership....

"The ongoing peace talks between the Philippines Government and the Mindanao Islamic Liberation Front at a seaside resort in Malaysia, bears testimony to this."

Malaysia and Libya are playing a pivotal role in the Philippines-MILF reaching a ceasefire and peace accord.

The negotiations which commenced last week could culminate in the signing of a peace accord in Kuala Lumpur, to coincide with Arroyo's visit, beginning Aug 7.

Malaysian Ambassador to the Philippines Arshad Hussein said six months after Arroyo's appointment, events surrounding the Philippines' domestic front, with the exception to the Basilan issue, seem to be moving in the right direction.

Describing media taglines of Manila being the kidnapping capital as "grossly exaggerated", Arshad said while foreigners have fallen victims to kidnap gangs, it must be acknowledged that foreigners themselves were masterminding the dastardly acts.

In recent months, news of Singaporeans and Indians being kidnapped for ransom captured media attention. However, Philippines investigators later uncovered that the masterminds were Singaporeans and Indians, either known to the victims or of their business interests in the Philippines.

"Domestic security and stability is the President's priority and the diplomatic community is constantly briefed on efforts in place."

Arshad added that Arroyo is of the view that failure to control negative publicity would be bad for economic development.

Taking a cue from the recently concluded Asean Ministerial Meeting in Hanoi, the Philippines acknowledges the importance of peace and stability which equates economic development.

On this note, the President is expected to discuss the revival of the BIMP-EAGA (Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines - East Asian Growth Area) during her talks with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The BIMP-EAGA is a private sector driven East Asian growth initiative.
"The initiative has much potential and the Philippines realises that stability in the Southern region, especially in Mindanao, is essential," Arshad told the New Straits Times.

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