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Thank you, Malaysia (HL)

Ashraf Abdullah; Tony Emmanuel in Manila  
MARAMING Salamat Po is what Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo will say when she visits Malaysia on Thursday. (see CORRECTION above )

The Tagalog words mean `thank you very much' and it is for Malaysia's contribution towards the peace process in southern Philippines.

"My main reason to visit Kuala Lumpur is to convey my Government's gratitude to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for Malaysia's efforts in promoting peace and development in Mindanao," Arroyo said during an interview at Malacanang Palace.

Describing Dr Mahathir as "my model of a leader", Arroyo said she would thank him and Malaysian officials for helping to convey to the leaders of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the sincerity of her administration in seeking a lasting solution in Mindanao.

Accompanying Arroyo on her three-day state visit, the first for a Philippine head of state since Fidel Ramos, will be her husband Jose Miguel Arroyo and a 90-member delegation.

Arroyo said the peace process between the Government and the MILF was now ongoing, adding that she would like to see development in the conflict areas even before the signing of any agreement.

On relations between Malaysia and the Philippines after the Estrada administration, Arroyo said bilateral relations had improved a lot and expressed hope that it would remain that way.

This is seemingly a stark contrast to the policy pursued by her predecessor, Joseph Estrada, who criticised Malaysia for the arrest of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim which resulted in strained bilateral relations.

Praising Dr Mahathir for his stand against currency speculators who are now believed to be behind the poor performance of the peso against the US dollar, Arroyo said: "He (Dr Mahathir) is my model of a leader. We will continue our efforts to curb such activities (speculation). Fundamentals show that the value of the peso against the dollar is undervalued. It should be about 50 pesos against the US dollar, and we believe we can achieve it soon."

Arroyo did not rule out the possibility of taking drastic steps to curb excessive speculation, including imposing exchange controls like Malaysia.

"We have an inventory of policies; I shouldn't be talking about it. We are determined to tackle currency speculation."

The President said she would also discuss with Dr Mahathir the possibility of reviving the Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines-East Asian Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA).

She also expressed hope that Malaysia and the Philippines could have more agreements on security.

"We do have agreements already in place. Rather than have something for every six months, I am really looking forward to something more regular."

"When Defence Minister (Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak) was here, he suggested border patrols. Malaysia is also looking at (identifying) six sea lanes for the movement of vessels. It is a very good idea and if we can formalise that idea into an agreement, we will welcome that."

She also hoped that Malaysia Airlines could begin direct flights from Kuala Lumpur to Davao.

Arroyo said the Philippines would also invite Malaysian businessmen to invest in oil palm cultivation in Mindanao.

