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Malaysia-Philippines

VISIT BY ARROYO'S SPECIAL ENVOYS SET TO WARM RELATIONS WITH MALAYSIA

By: E. Sivabalan

KUALA LUMPUR, March 6 (Bernama) -- The move by Philippines President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to despatch her special envoys to Malaysia is set to rejuvenate ties between Kuala Lumpur and Manila which went awry during Joseph Estrada's leadership.

The three-day visit by Roberto R. Romulo and Paul G. Dominguez to Malaysia from tomorrow is expected to "heal the wound" and open a new chapter in bilateral relations, a diplomat based here told Bernama.

"We can now look forward to a possible increase in bilateral trade and investments," he said.

Malaysians were among the biggest investors in the Philippines during the time of then president Fidel Ramos who struck a close rapport with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

When Estrada took over the Philippine presidency from Ramos in 1998, bilateral relations began to go awry partly due to his off-the-cuff comment in support of sacked deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim who is presently serving a jail sentence.

His comments was viewed as an interference in Malaysia's internal affairs. Estrada also remarked on Manila's claim to Sabah.

Since Arroyo became President on Jan 20, there are signs of a warming up in bilateral ties.

Dr Mahathir was among the first foreign leader to congratulate Arroyo on her ascent to the presidency after Estrada was toppled in a military-backed popular uprising.

Trade and investment missions also began to pick up.

International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz is scheduled to lead a high-powered mission to Manila for four days beginning tomorrow to resuscitate bilateral trade and investment relations which has sunk to a low point.

Arroyo herself was quoted as saying that the Sabah issue and other contentious matters should not strain ties between the Philippines and Malaysia.

The envoys' visit, the first from the Philippines since Arroyo became the president, is aimed at briefing Malaysian leaders on the policies of the new administration, Wisma Putra said in a statement today.

They are scheduled to call on Dr Mahathir, his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Agriculture Minister Datuk Effendi Norwawi.

They are expected to discuss regional and international issues and bilateral cooperation as well as attend a dinner meeting of the Malaysia-Philippines Business Council hosted by Deputy Foreign Minister Datuk Dr Leo Michael Toyad.

Malaysia and the Philippines have expanded functional cooperation through mechanisms such as the Joint Commission Meeting that coordinates cooperation in trade and investments, commodity, tourism, culture, health and agriculture.

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