

# Manila ready for talks with MILF

BY K.P. LEE 5 7 AUG 2003

**MANILA:** Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said the leadership change in Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) will not affect her government's policy "to pursue a just, comprehensive and durable solution" to the conflict in the southern Mindanao province.

"We are prepared for the opening of the peace talks as scheduled," she said in her address when opening the Asean Finance Minister's conference here yesterday. Second Finance Minister Datuk Jamaludin Jarjis represented Malaysia.

She said this after openly thanking Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed for his help in getting the two sides to the negotiating table.

"I have instructed the government peace panel to speed up the pace of resolution so that we can have a permanent ceasefire and break ground on new development projects," she said.

In a meeting clouded by a returning threat of terrorism following Tuesday's bombing in Jakarta which killed 13 people, Arroyo said regional co-operation in fighting terrorism had to be more intensive.

"This is a clear message that the war against terrorism in the region must be pursued without let up," she said after condemning those responsible for the attack.

The threat of terrorism was now a reality and we had to learn to live with them from day to day, she warned.

"Vigilance must become a way of life for our region even as we maintain normalcy in the course of work and business."

Later, Malaysian ambassador to the Philippines Mohd Taufik Mohd Noor said the Malaysian-brokered talks to bring peace to the troubled Mindanao province would not be derailed by the death of the MILF leader,

An MILF spokesman announced on Tuesday that the group's chairman Hashim Salamat Hashim died on July 13 of a heart failure and Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim had been elected to replace him.

"We regret his death but the MILF is not a personality-based movement. We think the talks will be pursued," Taufik told reporters.