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Dr M meets Arroyo, sets stage for talks with rebels

MANILA: Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has met with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, setting the stage for new peace talks with Filipino Muslim rebels, the Foreign Affairs Department here said yesterday.

Arroyo and Dr Mahathir met on Friday on the sidelines of a UN General Assembly conference in New York, the department said in a statement, quoting Philippine foreign secretary Blas Ople who accompanied Arroyo to New York.

"This meeting sets the stage for the holding of peace talks in Kuala Lumpur," Ople said, adding that Dr Mahathir "reiterated Malaysia's strong commitment to playing a crucial role in the peace negotiations by hosting and facilitating peace talks."

Kuala Lumpur has been fostering the peace process between Manila and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a 12,500-strong group that is fighting to set up an Islamic state in the southern third of the largely-Christian Philippines.

Arroyo told Dr Mahathir that her government had taken steps to ensure negotiations would be carried out smoothly.

Dr Mahathir in turn said Malaysia was willing to lead an international monitoring team from Islamic countries that would oversee the ceasefire between Manila and MILF, Ople reported.

Arroyo said her country has launched a bid for observer status in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference as part of efforts to move the peace process forward with Muslim rebels in her country.

She said on Friday that she would attend the conference in Malaysia next month, hoping "to use that time to advance the peace process in Mindanao and advance the understanding between all faiths." — Agencies