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Arroyo-Mahathir

ARROYO-MAHATHIR TALKS SLATED ON SIDELINE OF NAM MEET

MANILA, Feb 19 (Bernama) -- President Gloria Arroyo will hold talks with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on the sideline of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit Malaysia will host on Feb 23-25.

"There are many developments taking place, so we will exchange talks," she told a weekly luncheon meeting with reporters at Malacanang palace.

Arroyo cited Malaysia which, she said, "has been very helpful to us in the peace process" in Mindanao.

She referred to the peace talks Malaysia has hosted over the past years between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to put an end to the bloody separatist war in the south.

Prospects of resuming the talks to tackle the signing of a final peace accord look bleak, however, after skirmishes erupted anew last week between the military and the MILF.

The encounters, which left dozens of rebels and soldiers dead and thousands of civilians dislocated in central Mindanao, came after the military accused the MILF of coddling terrorists.

The MILF denied the charge and said it would boycott the talks in Malaysia unless the military pulls out the over 5,000 troops it has deployed against the separatist forces.

Arroyo lauded the military for seizing control of a sprawling MILF camp, including the mansion of rebel chieftain Hashim Salamat, and driving out the rebels from civilian areas.

She said that her special peace adviser, Norberto Gonzales, is now in Kuala Lumpur to initiate talks "regarding the peace process" with the MILF peace panel.

Arroyo, who will be accompanied by Foreign Secretary Blas Ople, said she would call for expanded international cooperation when she addresses the XIII NAM Summit.

She will be the 11th speaker during the NAM plenary session and general debate at the Putra World Trade Centre on Monday when the summit opens.

She will also join other heads of state in an official dinner to be hosted by Malaysia at the Royal Ballroom of the Palace of the Golden Horses on Monday.

-- BERNAMA

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