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Arroyo: Collective action needed

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THE prevailing threat of terrorism in this region can only be minimised through decisive and collective agreement taken by Asean Governments.

Condemning Tuesday's bombing of the JW Marriot hotel in Jakarta, Philippines President Gloria Arroyo said such an act was itself a clear message that the war against terrorism in this region must be pursued without let up through more intensive multilateral cooperation.

"The Philippines' National police, armed forces and other law enforcement agencies have standing alert orders aimed at thwarting any similar attacks.

"The region must now learn to live with these threats from day to day. Vigilance must become a way of life for our region even as we maintain normalcy in the course of work and business," she said in her opening address of the Seventh Asean Finance Ministers' Meeting (AFMM) here, yesterday.

The delegates present included Brunei Education Minister Pehin Abdul Aziz Umar, Cambodian Economic and Finance Minister Keat Chhon, Indonesian

Finance secretary-general Agus Haryanto, Laos Central Bank deputy governor

Phouphet Khamphounvong and Malaysian Ambassador to the Philippines Mohd Taufik Mohd Noor (representing Second Finance Minister Datuk Dr Jamaludin

Jarjis who was expected to arrive later in the day).

Also attending the two-day meeting were Myanmar Finance and Revenue Minister Major General Hla Tun, the Philippines' Finance Secretary Jose Isidro N. Camacho, Singapore's Second Finance Minister Hng Kiang Lim, Thai

Finance Minister Suchart Jaovisidha and Vietnamese Finance Minister Nguyen Sinh Hung.

Arroyo expressed optimism that the leadership transition in the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) would not affect the basic policy of her Government to pursue a comprehensive and durable solution to the conflict in Mindanao.

The leadership transition came following the death of MILF chairman Salamat Hashim 61, who died on July 13 due to heart failure.

Salamat will be succeeded by Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim who was selected by the MILF central committee. Murad will now lead the peace talks with the Philippines' Government.

"We are prepared for the opening of the peace talks as scheduled. I have instructed the Government's peace panel to speed up the resolution so that we can have a permanent ceasefire and break ground on new development projects.

"I would like to thank (Malaysian) Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for hosting the prospective talks," she

said.