

GMA, EC head agree to strengthen ties

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso agreed yesterday to start negotiations on a cooperation agreement intended to deepen relations between the Philippines and the European Union, Mala-

cañang announced yesterday.

A Palace statement said the two leaders reached the agreement during a meeting on the sidelines of the 7th Asia-Europe Meeting in Beijing, at the Great Hall of the People.

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"President Arroyo emphasized that the cooperation agreement would not only benefit Philippine trade in Europe but would open wide opportunities for greater cooperation," the statement said.

"Both leaders expressed satisfaction on the level of relations between the Philippine and the EU, and look forward to a more enhanced collaboration that the partnership agreement would offer," it said.

Mrs. Arroyo also thanked the EC for providing seven million euros to the relief and rehabilitation efforts in conflict-hit areas in Mindanao.

Barroso said the EU is very interested in Mindanao and "would like to see that peace and stability is achieved there."

He "commended the Philippine leader in her indefatigable efforts to pursue peace in Mindanao with her new peace initiatives and has urged her to continue her program to bring about durable peace and stability."

Mrs. Arroyo also expressed the country's appreciation for EU's offer of technical assistance in promoting human rights in the Philippines.

She noted the progress achieved by the EU Justice Assistance Mission (EUJAM), a project that seeks to strengthen human rights institutions as well as the criminal justice system in the Philippines. A memorandum of understanding would be signed between the Philippines and the EC for the immediate implementation of the EUJAM project.

Mrs. Arroyo and Barroso also exchanged views on the recently adopted EU Pact on Immigration and Asylum, which would form the backbone of a common EU migration policy.

Barroso assured Mrs. Arroyo of the coming migration policy's greater emphasis on protecting the rights of migrant workers in Europe.

"She expressed hope the European immigration policy will not discriminate against Filipino workers in Europe and emphasized that human rights is very important in ensuring the welfare of migrant workers," the statement read.

Mrs. Arroyo also held separate meetings with Malaysian President Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, and Thai Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat.

Press Secretary Jesus Dureza, in a telephone interview, said the meeting with Somchai was more of a "getting-to-know-you" talk since the latter was newly elected.

He said the President explained to Badawi the change in the government's policy on the peace process, from armed groups to communities and stakeholders.

Dureza said Badawi agreed there should be greater consultations with the people in forging a peace pact with the rebels.

She will also be meeting with officials of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, but no date has yet been set for the meeting.

The President and 44 other Asian and European heads of states will meet to discuss global issues including food security, disaster preparedness and management and the current global economic and financial situation.

Mrs. Arroyo has expressed her preference to speak at the second plenary session on World Economy and Financial Situation, rather than on international labor migration during the third plenary session, a Palace statement said.

"Specifically, she expressed her desire to speak on what emerging and developed countries should do together to cushion the impact of the global economic slowdown," it said.