

Plan to foster closer links with Soviets

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LENINGRAD, Tues. — Malaysia is encouraged by the changes taking place in the Soviet Union under its new leadership to foster closer links between the two countries, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The changes being instituted under the *perestroika* (reconstruction) initiatives had also encouraged Malaysia "to seek opportunities to expand our trade and economic co-operation with the Soviet Union".

"What we have seen has confirmed that there is considerable potential for a broadening of our economic links," he said at a dinner tonight in rounding up his seven-day visit.

The dinner was given by Leningrad Mayor (chairman of the executive committee of the Leningrad City Council) K.I.Khodyrov.

Also present were Soviet national leaders including Deputy Prime Minister B.Z. Tolstykh.

Dr Mahathir said he and his delegation come from a part of the world in which the USSR also had important interests — the Asia-Pacific region.

"While your country's history demonstrates a preoccupation with the West, the statement by Secretary-General Mikhail Gorbachev in July 1986 in Vladivostok was a reminder that the Soviet Union has important interests in Asia and the Pacific — a region which has assumed considerable importance in the global economy," he said.

The Prime Minister expressed similar sentiments when meeting members of the Leningrad executive committee earlier in the day.

Before that he laid a wreath at the Piskarevskoye memorial cemetery

where about half a million people who died in the 900-day siege of Leningrad by the Germans in the Second World War were buried.

Dr Mahathir and his delegation accompanied by Soviet officials from Moscow arrived from Urgench yesterday evening. On hand to welcome him at the airport were Mayor Khodyrov and members of his council.

He was driven in a double-line motocade about half a kilometre long from the airport to the Government guest house by the side of the Neva River.

There were banners welcoming him and from lampposts on both side of the route Malaysian and Soviet flags waved in the light rain.

Leningrad, population five million, is Soviet Union's second-biggest city and the cultural centre of the country.

Situated on the shore of the Gulf of Finland in the Baltic Sea, where the Neva River joins the sea, it was founded in 1703 by Peter the Great. It was first named St Petersburg and later changed to Petrograd.

In 1924 it was re-named Leningrad.

Leningrad is described as one of the world's most beautiful cities. Beside the magnificent winter palace of the Czars, other buildings of magnificent architecture, sculptures, wrought-iron grilles, bridges, granite-lined rivers and channels give the city a charm of its own.