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Dr M's 'getting to know you' visit

Hardev Kaur in Khabarovsk

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's working visit to the two Far Eastern Republics of Russia - Khabarovsk and Buryatia - has been described as a "getting to know you" visit.

Malaysia's ambassador to Moscow Datuk Yahya Baba said there was mutual interest between the two regions and Malaysia.

This side of Russia is part of the Pacific, a member of Apec besides participating in the Asean Post Ministerial Conference and the Asean Regional Forum.

Yahya said there had been "contacts" between Malaysia and these regions. The Governor of Khabarovsk, Victor Ishaev, has come to Kuala Lumpur several times while the President of Buryatia, Leonid V. Potapov was in Malaysia last month.

Dr Mahathir, who arrives here today, is scheduled to visit the aviation and shipbuilding facilities as well as Rimbunan Hijau, a Sarawak-based Malaysian company with timber concessions in Khabarovsk.

Yahya described this as "the only substantial Malaysian investment", adding that the company had been in operation for about two years.

Rimbunan Hijau, has timber concessions in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Latin American countries but this is the first for the company in a temperate forest. The markets for its products are mainly in Japan and Korea.

The company also has interests in the media industry with its ownership of Ming Pao, a Chinese language paper in Hong Kong and the Chinese edition of Asiaweek.

The two republics have substantial aviation and maritime industries. The defence aviation industry has spawned several economic activities in and around the regions.

In fact Komsomol-na-Amur, a city on the Amur River, was built as a defence city some 30 years ago. The Sukhoi military aircraft plant is located here.

Efforts are under way to convert the facilities to produce civilian and commercial aircraft. Similarly the shipbuilding plant in Khabarovsk, which the Prime Minister is scheduled to visit, is also being converted from being just a defence facility.

Once converted, it will be able to provide and build craft of whatever size or use, including luxury, tourist, fishing, civilian and defence vessels.

This is the first visit to the region by Dr Mahathir who last visited Soviet Union in 1987. Since the break up of the former Soviet Union, there are 98 republics in Russia with 20 of these being autonomous.

The Prime Minister has visited a number of the Confederation of Independent States, which were previously part of Soviet Union. These include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Dr Mahathir will be accompanied by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Defence Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha.

From Khabarovsk, Dr Mahathir will visit China before going to Ulan Ude, the capital of Buryatia.

According to Yahya, Buryatia is rich in mineral resources. "You name it, they have it" he said, adding that the authorities were also keen to develop tourism industry on Lake Baikal.

Lake Baikal is the largest lake in the world - about 31,000 square

kilometres. It is about two-thirds the size of Peninsular Malaysia.

It is said to hold 20 per cent of the world's fresh water and has more water than all the Great Lakes combined. The lake is nearly 1.8km deep.

Khabarovsk, the first stop of Dr Mahathir's Siberian journey, with a population of nearly 700,000 is close to the border with China and is the last major stop on the Siberian railroad before Vladivostok.

The city, the second only in size to Vladivostok in the Russian Far East, boasts three major transport links - air, sea and land - the most famous of which is the Trans-Siberian railway.

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