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Mahathir-Buryatia

MAHATHIR IN RUSSIAN REPUBLIC OF BURYATIA

By: Azman Ujang

ULAN UDE, (Russia) Aug 20 (Bernama) -- After three days in China, Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrived in this Russian Republic of Buryatia today where he will stay for another three days, the last leg of his current overseas tour of three regions.

Buryatia President Leonid Potapov, who visited Malaysia last month, greeted Dr Mahathir, accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, on his arrival at 2.15 pm (1.15 pm Malaysian time) by a chartered Canadair SE executive jet.

He was given a traditional Buryatia as well as Russian welcome, first a Buryat man chanting words of welcome garlanded him with a blue sash, then a Russian lass presented him with a tray containing a loaf of bread and a bowl of salt.

Dr Mahathir was invited to break the bread and had to dip a piece of it into the salt and ate it, in symbolic Russian hospitality.

Then Potapov, his wife, the prime minister, Dr Siti Hasmah and Malaysian Ambassador to Russia Datuk Yahya Baba, took turn to sip fresh milk from a bowl, another Russian custom. The milk signifies purity.

Earlier, two other executive aircraft carrying officials and some businessmen arrived shortly before the prime minister, one carrying Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Defence Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha, and the other rimbunan Hijau Group chairman Tan Sri Tiong Hiew King and some company executives.

Dr Mahathir is the first foreign head of government to visit Buryatia since this South-Central Asian territory became an autonomous republic of Russia in 1991.

Buryatia is about three times larger than Malaysia in land size but has a population of only one million or about half of Kuala Lumpur's population and the majority of its people, the Buryats, are of Mongolian descent.

Of the total population, 360,000 are found in Ulan Ude (which means Red River), the capital.

He and President Potapov later held a meeting to discuss bilateral matters,

Dr Mahathir was joined at this meeting by three Malaysian corporate figures namely Tiong, Airod President Tan Sri Ahmad Johan and Malaysia Mining Corporation (MMC) Executive Director Abdul Shukor Shahar.

MMC is keen to cooperate in mining ventures with Buryatia, a region which sits on some 500 types of minerals, mostly unexplored.

Airod, the Malaysia aircraft servicing company, is negotiating with Russian officials here to service Russian-made aircraft being used by various countries in Southeast Asia and India, believed to be totalling 10,000.

Rimbunan Hijau has a 600,000-hectare timber concession in the Khabarovsk region which Dr Mahathir visited before his trip to China.

Tomorrow, the prime minister is due to visit two aviation plants, one here and the other in Irkutsk, about 500 kilometres from here.

On Sunday, Dr Mahathir will take a one-hour helicopter ride from here to Lake Baikal, the tourism gem of this Siberian region because of its sheer size.

The lake is 636 kilometres long, with a surface area of 31,500 square

kilometres or two-thirds the size of Peninsular Malaysia, and with a depth of over one kilometre, the clear-water nature's wonder is the world's deepest.

Here, he will be taken on a cruise along the lake, which contains 20 per cent of the world's fresh water supplies.

Returning from the lake in the evening, Dr Mahathir will hold a press conferece before flying home.

He is due back in Kuala Lumpur at 7.50 am on Monday, after a technical stop-over for the aircraft in Wuhan, China.

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