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PM: More trade links with small nations will be sought

Fadzil Ghazali

MALAYSIA is a trading nation and cannot leave unexplored markets currently considered as non-traditional and places whose names are alien to most Malaysians.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said this yesterday when asked about his visits, among other places, to two autonomous regions in the Russian Federation, Khabarovsk and Buryatia.

"As a trading nation, Malaysia needs to find more trading partners. It cannot rely too much on traditional ones," he told reporters at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Airport in Subang, Selangor, yesterday upon his return from his one-week trip.

For this reason, Malaysia will continue to pursue opportunities for trade links with small nations all over the world, Dr Mahathir said.

"We should remember that our relationships with nations of the South at first were weak and offered little trade opportunities. Now, Malaysia's bilateral trade with them has grown to RM90 billion (in 1998)," he added. This is a massive improvement from RM20 billion in 1990. In the first half of 1999, it was RM44.5 billion.

In this context, the visits were "satisfactory and successful" in terms of improving ties with prospective trading partners, the Prime Minister said.

Dr Mahathir arrived in Khabarovsk in Siberia on August 15, from where he proceeded to Beijing three days later to commemorate the visit made 25 years ago by the late Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak which paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations with China.

His final stop was Ulan Ude in Buryatia, where he spent three days. Buryatia and Khabarovsk are part of the 89-state Russian Federation.

Malaysia cannot dismiss small and far away countries as trading partners, he said. "At first we may not see the potential. But if we make studies ... gather useful information about the countries, we will find that we can increase our trade with them."

On his visit to the Siberian region, the Prime Minister said it augurs well for Malaysia's relations with Russia.

"The Siberians are friendly people but Siberia's state of development, especially in transportation, is still inadequate in terms of improving its links with the rest of the world."

In Khabarovsk, Dr Mahathir had a close look at the state's aircraft manufacturing industry and was briefed on its trade and investment opportunities. At present, only one Malaysian company has operations in Khabarovsk, a plywood manufacturing plant.

In Ulan Ude, the Prime Minister toured a helicopter manufacturing facility. He said Malaysia purchased two helicopters but they were not Buryatian made.

Nevertheless, Buryatia has entered into a cooperation pact with Malaysia's Airod for the refurbishing of helicopters.

In China, the Prime Minister met with Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji on bilateral and international matters.

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