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PM and delegation to make exploratory visit to Buryatia

Fauziah Ismail in Ulan Ude, Buryatia (Russia Federation)

ULAN UDE, Buryatia (Russia Federation), Fri: - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will arrive here this afternoon for a two-day working visit described by officials as exploratory in nature especially in areas of aero-defence technology and business opportunities in the mining and timber processing sectors.

Dr Mahathir is the first foreign head of Government to visit this autonomous Russian republic. His visit is on the invitation of Buryatia president Leonid Vassilevich Potapov. Potapov had visited Malaysia in July.

Ulan Ude, located in the southeast of Siberia, nestles between Lake Baikal - the world's deepest lake - and the Mongolian border.

Dr Mahathir, who will be arriving from China after attending the 25th anniversary celebration of Malaysia-China relations, will be received by Potapov.

The Prime Minister will be accompanied by his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Dr Syed Hamid Albar and Defence Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha.

Members of the private sector delegation include Rimbunan Hijau Group managing director Tan Sri Tiong Hiew KIng, Airod Sdn Bhd and Aerospace Industry Malaysia president Tan Sri Ahmad Johan and Malaysian Mining Corporation executive director Ab Shukor Shahar.

During his visit, Dr Mahathir will visit the Ulan Ude Aviation plant and the Irkutsk Aviation Plant.

Last year, Malaysians bought two Buryatia-made MI17 helicopters costing more than RM60 million for the Fire and Rescue Services Department.

An Airod delegation also visited the republic last year to evaluate the viability of the proposed aviation centre in Malaysia.

During his visit to Malaysia last July, Potapov had announced that Buryatia planned to set up an aviation centre in Malaysia to market its helicopters in the region.

He said the establishment of the proposed regional centre was the republic's top priority project because of its good potential.

Its helicopters have already been sold to Sri Lanka, China and several other countries in the South-East Asian region.

The republic's mining, timber-processing and tourism sectors are also areas which offer Malaysian businessmen opportunities for investments.

Figures in 1992 showed that total foreign investment in Buryatia stands at just US\$22.3 million (US\$1 = RM3.80).

Some 100 joint ventures with foreign firms have been formed, mainly in the timber industry, but only half are currently operating.

Buryatia, situated along the eastern shore of Lake Baikal, has substantial deposits of zinc, gold, bentonite, lead, graphite and marble. Seventy-two per cent of the republic is forested.

Lake Baikal, which contains about 20 per cent of the world's fresh water and the deepest in the world, is Buryatia's foremost tourist attraction. The republic expects some 1.2 million tourists in the future.

Dr Mahathir is expected to visit the Rovesnik Recreation Centre and Ust-Banguzin Village at the lake on Sunday before flying home later in the afternoon.

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