

14 AUG 1999
Russia-Size
SIZING UP HUGE RUSSIA CAN BE MIND-BOGGLING

By: Azman Ujang

KHABAROVSK (Russia) Aug 14 (Bernama) -- It's mind-boggling to imagine just how big Russia is.

It's the world's largest country no doubt. The country is so huge that Malaysians would be shocked to learn that there's a lake in Russia which is two-thirds the size of the entire Peninsular Malaysia.

Even with the break-up of the former Soviet Union, which led to the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) like the Muslim republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan to name a few, the Russia that remains still comprises almost 100 regions and republics.

Ninety-eight to be exact, with 20 autonomous republics.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will visit two such regions in the next one week, starting with Khabarovsk, a city of 700,000 people on the banks of the Amur River in the Russian Far East and capital of Khabarovskii.

And due to its geographical distances and flight connections which no travel agents in Kuala Lumpur were prepared to arrange, Malaysian journalists covering the prime minister this time had to arrive four days in advance -- thanks to domestic bookings made by staff of the Malaysian embassy in Seoul.

Dr Mahathir is due to arrive here late Sunday night for a four-day stay which in the words of the Malaysian ambassador to Russia, Datuk Yahya Baba, is more of a "getting to know" working visit.

Why Khabarovsk, or for that matter Buryatia, which the prime minister will head to on Aug 20, both Russian territories Malaysians have hardly heard of.

His trip to these two places will be sandwiched by a two-night visit to the Chinese capital of Beijing.

Yahya, speaking to Malaysian journalists here Friday, said this would be the first time that Dr Mahathir would visit a Russian territory since the break-up of the Soviet Union and since his official visit to Moscow in 1987.

"Since then officials of our two countries have been trying to arrange for a mutually acceptable date for the prime minister to make another visit to Moscow but it has not been possible. So the Russians are really looking forward to Dr Mahathir coming to this Asian part of Russia this time," he said.

The prime minister however previously also made official visits to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia.

"Russia is part of the Pacific and takes part in processes like Apec (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) and the Asean Post-Ministerial Meetings and Asean Regional Forum. So it is relevant that we should know this Asian part of Russia. Malaysia would like to engage Russia fully in these processes," he said.

Yahya said the Governor of Khabarovskii had been to Malaysia a couple of times while the President of Buryatia Leonid Vassilievich Potapov visited Malaysia only last month.

Buryatia is an autonomous republic in South-Central region of Siberia along the eastern shore of Lake Baikal, which at over one kilometre deep is the world's deepest lake.

Lake Baikal at 31,000 sq km is said to hold 20 per cent of the world's

fresh water supplies and is two-thirds the size of Peninsular Malaysia (51,000 sq km).

Malaysian travel agents also do not handle flight bookings to Ulan Ude, capital of Buryatia which Dr Mahathir will visit from Aug 20-23.

While Dr Mahathir will fly to Ulan Ude from Beijing on a private jet, other members of his entourage, security officials and a limited number of journalists will make their way to the Siberian city in a specially chartered flight from Kuala Lumpur and back.

But some of the journalists already here to cover the Khabarovsk part of the visit had chosen to travel to Ulan Ude from Khabarovsk, first by flying to Irkutsk, then continuing the journey by land to Ulan Ude on arrangements by courtesy of the Malaysian embassy in Moscow.

And due to flight connection problems, this group of journalists would be in for more adventure as they would be making their way back to Kuala Lumpur all the way up the roof of the world via Moscow, rounding up the assignment in 16 days in all since their arrival here on Thursday.

In these visits, the Malaysian ambassador said the prime minister is particularly keen to look at the aviation industry in both Khabarovskii and Buryatia, the former in the process of converting its defence aircraft industry into making civilian and cargo planes.

He will visit a helicopter factory in Ulan Ude which makes helicopters already being used by the Malaysian Fire and Rescue Department.

Dr Mahathir will also be given a briefing on the operation of a Malaysian company here, the Rimbunan Hijau Group.

The Sarawak-based Rimbunan Hijau, reputedly one of the world's largest logging concessionaires with operations in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Latin America, China and Malaysia, is also the only Malaysian investor in Russia, with logging and wood processing operations.

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