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Vast economic prospects with Far East Russia

Hardev Kaur in Khabarovsk, Russia

THERE is scope for greater economic interaction between Malaysia and Far East Russia.

This is the opinion of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is convinced of such prospects after his visit to Khabarovsk.

Russia is a big place and "we cannot conduct relations with Russia simply through Moscow so we think we should also conduct relations with the various territories of Russia which in themselves are big economic entities".

Dr Mahathir told a Press conference at the end of his three-day visit to Khabarovsk that "I'll go back and discuss with members of my Cabinet how we can improve relations with this region".

In fact efforts are being made to increase the level of communication between Malaysia and Khabarovsk. Visitors from Khabarovsk to Kuala Lumpur for one month do not need a visa. An agreement to this effect was signed last November. This will encourage more people from Khabarovsk to visit Malaysia.

There is need for greater contact between Malaysians and those from Khabarovsk - not only by government officials but also cultural exchanges.

Dr Mahathir said: "I have noticed that there are a lot of young people and children. It looks to me like a very young country. Perhaps some contacts between the people of the younger generation may be useful to bring the peoples closer together."

Since Malaysia is not well known in this part of Russia, Dr Mahathir suggested there should be some promotion of the country including having a "trade house" as proposed by the Governor of Khabarovsk, Victor Ishaev, where tourism to Malaysia can also be promoted. Ishaev was also present during the Press conference.

Presently Khabarovsk airlines flies only to Singapore and Thailand and not to Malaysia. The Prime Minister hopes that charter flights can be mounted between Khabarovsk and Malaysia and subsequently scheduled flights as well. He added: "It would be useful if we can invite the Press to come to Malaysia."

In reply to a question from a Khabarovsk journalist Dr Mahathir said there were a lot of products which Malaysia could source from Khabarovsk and there were Malaysian products which would find ready markets in Khabarovsk.

However there is a need to work out the mode and cost of transportation. Once this has been worked out it will be possible to increase bilateral trade.

Dr Mahathir who earlier visited the Central Market and central Grocery Store in Khabarovsk said he was amazed that the region actually imported fruits from as far away as Spain and Morocco.

Asked for his impressions of Khabarovsk and advice to its people, the Prime Minister said the people of Khabarovsk were very friendly and "these are the kind of people we would like to get better acquainted with, "adding that "I am quite sure that both sides will benefit from exchanges of visits."

Dr Mahathir said he was thankful to Governor Ishaev who had been very hospitable and given so much of this time during the course of the visit.

He told the journalist: "I think you are very lucky that you do not have changes in government very often. In Malaysia we value political stability

and I am quite sure that people of Khabarovsk also value such stability."

In reply to another question on the possibility of developing links with other Russian regions, Dr Mahathir said he would be visiting Buryatia later this week to see the possibility of co-operation in the aircraft industry particularly the helicopters.

The President of Buryatia visited Malaysia recently and requested that Malaysian businessmen examine the possibility of investing there.

A TV journalist told the Prime Minister that following the visit he was now a familiar face in Khabarovsk and asked the Prime Minister about his personal life and family.

There was wide coverage of Dr Mahathir's visit in the local media.

He told the Press conference that he was glad to be able to make the visit admitting that "I was very curious about this part of Russia...and I am very pleasantly surprised to see how developed it is".

During the visit, the first by Dr Mahathir to the Russian Far East, he visited the aircraft facility at Komsomolsk-na-Amure, where the "sophisticated" Sikhoi is manufactured, and the shipyard in Khabarovsk and held discussions with the Governor.

He was also briefed on Rimbunan Hijau, a Sarawak-based company's operations here which started operations two years ago and has timber concessions of 600,000ha in Pichy and Sukpai districts - both in Khabarovsk Territory. The company has a long-term lease of 49 years for the concession area. Its concession represents about 2-3 per cent of total forest area in the Khabarovsk Territory.

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

He left yesterday for Beijing for a two day working visit and flies to Buryatia tomorrow for a three-day visit before going home.

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