'Significant time to meet'

SUN 13 MAR 2002

PM's visit to Moscow a perfect opportunity to strengthen ties, says envoy

By **Ahmad Zukiman Zain**

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues: As Russia and Malaysia celebrate the 35th year of their diplomatic relations next month, Moscow is rolling out the red carpet for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit on Thursday, with a view to strengthening bilateral ties.

Russian ambassador to Malaysia Vladimir Morozov said the prime minister was visiting Moscow at a significant moment after an earlier schedule in September last year was postponed because of the terrorist attacks on the United States.

"This will be the perfect opportunity for the leaders of our countries to check their positions on global issues and to revise bilateral ties," he said.

Mahathir will hold talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday – their third meeting after fruitful discussions on the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum in Brunei two years ago and in Shanghai last year.

The prime minister's two-day stay in Moscow will be followed by visits to Germany and Poland.

This is his second trip to Russia. He visited the Khabarovsk and Buryatia regions in 1999.

Morozov noted that bilateral relations between Malaysia and Russia had been "featured by a high extent of understanding and credibility".

"It's worth appraising that as the regional and global environment was changing during the past decades, we succeeded in avoiding the stumbling blocks and have achieved a remarkable record of friendly cooperation," said Morozov, who has been here for one-and-a-half years.

"The range of activities we are engaged in is quite wide and promising. There are joint aerospace projects, palm oil deal discussions, news agency cooperation, defence equipment supply deals and other government-led initiatives.

"The present challenges of globalisation and the mutual search for exterior ties diversification draw us to the need of intensifying direct bilateral contacts, taking advantage of those fields where our demands and potentials meet each other."

He said Russian-Malaysian ties should be focused on economic partnership led by the private sector in both countries.

Maintaining inter-governmental contacts has helped both countries lay the legal ground for cooperation.

Russia is looking forward to the business forum organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute and Russia-Asean Cooperation Fund, where Mahathir will speak on globalisation and its effects.

"It could help Malaysian and Russian companies establish direct business links that our countries are still lacking. I'm sure they will gain the benefit of the industrial and human resource potential of both countries," Morozov said.

He said Malaysia had become one of Russia's key trading partners in Southeast Asia, with a turnover averaging US$310 million (RM1.1 billion) per year from 1996-2001.

There is a vast potential for enhancing trade relations. The promising fields of cooperation include joint projects engaging Russian high technologies related to civil aviation, aerospace systems and management of emergencies.

Morozov also said Mahathir is a popular figure in Russia.

"Dr Mahathir, who has been governing Malaysia for the longest part of the history of our official relations, is a well-known and popular figure in Russian political and academic circles," he said.