

'Putin can restore Russia to greatness'

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From Hardev Kaur in Moscow

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RUSSIA has taken great steps forward and this will result in the Russian Federation becoming one of the great powers again.

President Vladimir Putin is obviously a very strong leader and "I believe, (he) can restore Russia to its position of greatness", Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

Responding to a question at a Press conference, Dr Mahathir said maintaining a balance was important in everything in life. Even in international affairs there is a need to have a balance of power.

"If you have too much weight on one side, you are likely to topple over," he said, pointing out that the balance of power had been practised in Europe for ages to ensure that no one dominated.

When asked about the importance of another power to counter the unipolar situation currently prevalent in the world, with US being the superpower, Dr Mahathir said: "When one party dominates there is a tendency for them to become very domineering, very inconsiderate of others.

"If Russia is able to balance once again the might of other countries, this will afford many weak countries the choice of changing sides, the option to defect. And because of this, I think both sides will behave themselves."

Elaborating, Dr Mahathir said:

"Just imagine, if we are all created with only one eye we cannot appreciate depth and because we cannot appreciate depth, we are likely to fall down the staircase."

The Prime Minister, who had visited Soviet Union in 1987, noted there had been tremendous changes. Russia then, he said, was undergoing change with *perestroika* and *glasnost* and things were not very settled. There were attempts then to adjust to a new political and economic system.

"Moscow certainly did not look as bright and full of shops as it does now. What we are seeing today is the result of the changes from 1986 to 2002.

"There have been tremendous changes both in the attitude of the people in their understanding of the free market and the prospect of democracy."

Describing his visit to Russia as "very successful", he said there is a desire on the part of both countries to work together.

Asked on the possibility of Malaysia purchasing military equipment, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was interested in acquiring some military aircraft, adding that he was impressed with the performance of the Sukhoi 30 when he visited the Zhukovsky Aviation Institute.

"It (Sukhoi) will be considered among the various alternatives available," he said, adding that possible participation in the offset programme, testing, modification and the assembly of the aircraft would be considered.

Asked about the change in view and attitude of the California Pension Fund (Calpers) which had withdrawn its funds from Malaysia but later changed its views, Dr Mahathir said their original views were actually not valid.

Calpers had earlier decided not to invest in Southeast Asia and had claimed that the countries lacked transparency and corporate governance, among others.

"This was because their decisions were made without proper investigation, without indepth investigation," Dr Mahathir said, adding that most of them were relying on newspaper reports which are "very shallow" as they did not really study the countries.

"They (the media) have an agenda of their own. Therefore, their reports were wrong and anybody who makes decisions based on the reports of these media would make the wrong decision."

Dr Mahathir said he was glad that Calpers had now changed their views on Southeast Asia and Malaysia. In fact, Calpers is believed to be one of the funds that had shown keen interest in participating in Malaysia's recent bond issue. The response to the bond was overwhelming and was almost four times over-subscribed.

Dr Mahathir was in Russia on the first leg of his three-nation visit which includes Germany and Poland. During his four-day official visit to Russia, Dr Mahathir also discussed bilateral, regional and international issues with Putin and Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov.