

# PM given rare honour in Moscow

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A GROUP of Malaysians huddled together outside the Russian Bolshoi theatre on a cold winter evening on Friday.

Everyone was asking: "Did you see the crowd standing up when the orchestra played *Negaraku*?"

The temperature was well below zero degree but the Malaysians were feeling warm inside because their national anthem was played and the Malaysian flag was hoisted in the prestigious and world-renowned Russia Bolshoi theatre when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali arrived.

The packed theatre, with members of the audiences holding binoculars, seemed surprised with the announcement and started to seek the Prime Minister out and applauded after the national

anthem ended.

Such a gesture was a welcoming sight and a sense of pride prevailed among Malaysians in the theatre.

A prominent business leader even commented that the anthem was played so well by the orchestra.

A senior journalist, who has covered Dr Mahathir on his visits abroad, noted that the Prime Minister had attended other performances during his visits but never before was such an honour accorded him.

In fact, to the over 200 Malaysians accompanying Dr Mahathir on his official visit to Russia, many first timers, Moscow was a pleasant surprise.

The stereotype image of Russia with its stodgy women was "shattered" when visitors kept passing long-legged women in micro-mini skirts in the city.

Dr Mahathir, who is in Moscow after his first visit in

1987, even commented that the city had undergone a lot of changes.

"Moscow certainly did not look as bright and full of shops as it does now.

"Obviously what we are seeing today is a result of the changes from 1987 to 2002. There have been tremendous changes both in the attitude of the people, their understanding of the free market and process of democracy."

Gone are the long queues for bread and daily necessities. Moscow can pass off as any Western metropolis with colourful billboards, fast food chains and the best of Western fashion.

A Malaysian official said sales of branded goods in Moscow was the highest in the city compared with other cities in the world.

Even International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, who had accompanied the Prime Minis-

ter on his visit in 1987, noticed the changes.

"The last time I was given coupons for my meals, there was no television in my room but now it is totally different."

"There are glaring changes. The last time I was here, everything was regimented. We were put up at a government-owned hotel on the periphery of the Red Square.

"Everything was by coupon and you do not veer from what was stated in the coupon, what you eat, what you do and every step you took was monitored."

Now, luxury cars are a common sight. Rows of BMWs, Mercedes Benz and Volvos jammed the street when none was visible in 1987. The only cars then were Russian-made Volgas.

Dr Mahathir left Moscow feeling good about the visit and is confident that bilateral relations will be further strengthened into new areas.

Both Dr Mahathir and

President Vladimir Putin described each other as strong leaders and they seemed to get along very well during the talks.

Perhaps when Putin finds his way to Malaysia soon and he will get a feel of the country's vibrant market economy and democratic institutions and processes.