

New moves to further cement ties between Malaysia and Russia

Malaysia and Russia have reached the 35th year of diplomatic relations. As the Russian Federation commemorates its National Day tomorrow, PAUL GABRIEL writes on the increasing exchange of proposals and initiatives between Moscow and Kuala Lumpur.

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"YOUR Prime Minister has set foot on Antarctica and every other place in the world. We're going to help take him to the North Pole," said Russian Ambassador to Malaysia Vladimir Morozov with conviction.

The Russian "manoeuvring" has already begun. On Friday, Morozov was busy conferring with a special Russian delegation led by North and South Pole researcher Artur Chilingarov, who was here to prepare the groundwork for Malaysia's "research assault" on the polar zones. Chilingarov is also the Deputy Speaker of the Russian *Duma*.

Morozov said the polar research was among the projects that Russia had pledged to help Malaysia with during President Vladimir Putin's bilateral meeting with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Moscow in March.

"Chilingarov is a very able scientist, and heads the Russian Association of Scientists for Research in the Arctic and Antarctica. He is now preparing a report (for Malaysia) on Russia's experience in the Arctic and Antarctica.

"Two Russian scientists will arrive here in August to lend a helping hand," said Morozov in an interview at his home which is located within the Russian Embassy's Jalan Ampang grounds.

(Dr Mahathir's trip to Antarctica recently was on board the Russian ice-breaker, *Captain Dranitsyn*.)

Morozov described such research as only the "tip of the iceberg", as far as Russian assistance to Malaysia was concerned.

"We are striding forward in our bilateral ties in many other spheres. Since Russia (then known as the Soviet Union) and Malaysia established diplomatic ties 35 years ago, we signed nine inter-governmental agreements and MoUs. We are now working to update the

scope of our co-operation, and considering fresh proposals as well," he added.

He cited Proton exports to Russia, exploitation of timber resources of the Russian Far East by the Rim-bunan Hijau Group of Sarawak and aerospace co-operation culminating in the successful launch of the Malaysian microsatellite TiungSat-1 by a Russian rocket vehicle in 2000 as notable bilateral developments, adding that there was a proposal to launch more Malaysian satellites using Russian rockets.

"A real focal point of our ties has been on educational co-operation. The breakthrough came when the Malaysian Government officially recognised the diplomas of several Russian medical universities in September 2001," said Morozov, who was posted here on Sept 27, 2000.

The ambassador said Russia was prepared to help Malaysia train more scientists and professionals.

"Malaysians studying medicine in Russia, why are they being limited to the medical sphere only? We are looking forward to enhancing and enlarging the scope of possible education areas for Malaysians studying in Russia," he pointed out.

He cited co-operation in biotechnology and meteorology as other fresh initiatives being pursued by both countries.

On bilateral trade, Morozov said Russian exports to Malaysia totalled US\$300.8mil (RM1.15bil) in 2000 and US\$264.9mil (RM1.017bil) in 2001, with imports from Malaysia at US\$87.3mil (RM335.3mil) and US\$159.1mil (RM610.9mil) respectively, making Malaysia Russia's second largest trading partner after Singapore in South-East Asia.

Russia's exports here mainly comprise chemical products, metals, metallic goods and spare parts, while imports from Malaysia were mostly

electrical appliances and palm oil products.

Among the Russian enterprises operating here were the Federal State Unitary Enterprise *Rosobronexport*, Russian aircraft corporation *MiG* and the Russian information agency, *Novosti*.

Besides the office of the Commercial Counsellor, Morozov said his government also maintained the Russian Centre for Science and Culture and Office of the Military Attache in Kuala Lumpur.

He said the centre was aimed at providing first-hand "authentic information" about modern Russia, its history and cultural heritage.

"The centre also conducts Russian language courses," he added.

Morozov said among his priorities would be to get *Aeroflot* to resume direct flights to Kuala Lumpur, which the Russian airliner scrapped last April.

"It is only 10 hours to fly direct between Moscow and Kuala Lumpur. Now, it takes up to 20 hours to get here (from Moscow), using other routes from Paris, London, Zurich and Tokyo. This cannot do, as time is money to businessmen," he said.

He said it was important to resume the direct flights as more Russian tourists were flocking to Thailand and Indonesia instead, adding that last year about 70,000 of his countrymen visited Thailand and 10,000 to Bali.

"According to our reports, only 5,000 Russians visited Malaysia," he revealed, adding that *Aeroflot* operated 14 direct weekly flights to Bangkok.