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Russia-Malaysia

RUSSIA LOOKS FORWARD TO DR MAHATHIR'S VISIT TO STRENGTHEN TIES

By: Ahmad Zukiman Zain

KUALA LUMPUR, March 12 (Bernama) -- 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 he was happy that the prime minister was visiting Moscow at this significant moment after an earlier schedule in September last year was postponed due to the terrorist attacks on the United States.

"This will be the perfect opportunity for the leaders of our countries to check up their positions on global issues and, no less important, to revise the whole complex of bilateral ties," he said in an interview with Bernama here.

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

The prime minister's two-day stay in Moscow is the first stop of a whirlwind visit to Russia, Germany and Poland. This is his second trip to Russia after his visit to the regions of Khabarovsk and Buryatia in August 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.

"I would say that we've become good partners and 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.

Asked about the areas of cooperation that could be further explored, he said the driving force of the Russian-Malaysian relationship should now be focused on the economic partnership led by the private sectors in both countries.

"During the last years, we have been maintaining rather intensive intergovernmental contacts that helped us to discuss the bilateral agenda at the high level and to lay the legal ground for our cooperation.

"Now the time has definitely come for our business communities to avail themselves of it and thus pave the way for joint entrepreneurship.

"That's why we set high hopes on the forthcoming visit by the Honourable Prime Minister of Malaysia to Russia and in particular the business forum organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute and Russia-Asean Cooperation Fund with wide Malaysian private sector participation," he said.

Dr Mahathir will speak on globalisation and its effects towards a fair and prosperous world at the forum after his meeting with Putin.

"I expect it could help Malaysian and Russian companies to establish

direct business links that our countries are still lacking. If they overcome the mutual deficit of knowledge and become more open to each other, I'm sure they will gain the benefit of the industrial and human resource potential of both countries," Morozov said.

He noted that Malaysia had become one of the Russia's key trading partners in Southeast Asia with a turnover averaging US\$310 million per year in 1996-2001.

He believes that there is a vast potential for enhancing the trade relations, including the possibility of Malaysia promoting ties with some of the Russian regions, as the Russian federal government had endorsed its component republics and regions to pursue their own external economic activities.

"This is in particular the Khabarovsk Region and Yakutia-Sakha Republic that are closer to Malaysia geographically and represent an exclusively rich natural potential," he said.

The promising fields of cooperation included joint projects engaging Russian high technologies related to civil aviation, aerospace systems and management of emergencies, he said.

The ambassador said the real focal point of Russian-Malaysian ties had been educational cooperation.

"Thanks to the recent recognition by the Malaysian government of the diplomas of several Russian medical universities and consequent publications in some major local newspapers, the popularity of Russian education in Malaysia, I daresay, is mushrooming now", he said.

Asked if Russia would be proposing new initiatives to enhance bilateral ties during the prime minister's visit, he said Moscow would be taking up several proposals that had been put forward.

"As there is quite a large variety of ideas on both sides on how to promote bilateral cooperation, Russia will formalise some of its proposals in the fields that require government participation.

"This particularly relates to the transfer of Russian high technologies, including biotechnology that is now the top priority in the Malaysian scientific agenda.

Dr Mahathir is scheduled to visit the Bio-organic Chemistry Centre of the Academy of Science and the Zhukovsky Aviation Institute on the second day of his visit.

Morozov said: "In general, Russia will take this opportunity to strengthen its friendly relations with Malaysia."

"Let me confess that 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.

Several publications in Russia, including the book 'Dr Mahathir Mohamad: Politician and Personality', had been recently dedicated to him, he said.

He said the prime minister's prominent guidance to make Malaysia an independent and resounding player in world affairs was also admired.

Dr Mahathir, who will be accompanied by Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, three Cabinet ministers and three chief ministers, is also scheduled to meet Malaysian students while in Moscow.

He will leave for Germany on Saturday before wrapping up the visit in Poland on March 21 to 23.

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