

# Gearing up for Putin's delayed KL meeting

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Tragic events have twice delayed meetings between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. As Putin prepares to leave for Kuala Lumpur tomorrow, another terrorist blast has occurred at a Russian town. writes PAUL GABRIEL

**T**HE plane that was to carry Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Moscow was about to depart KL International Airport on the night of Sept 11, 2001 when news of the stunning terrorist attacks in New York and Washington broke.

After deep consideration, the Prime Minister appropriately called off his trip and the Russians, who had been well prepared to receive him, accepted the decision.

The PM and his delegation did take off for the Russian capital – six months later.

The stage was then set for Putin to arrive on a historic visit here last month, but a “terror jinx” was to thwart it at the 11th hour.

The July 7 visit was derailed due to suicide bombings in a crowded weekend area in Moscow, and Putin telephoned Dr Mahathir to convey his apologies.

The Russian head of state rescheduled his Kuala Lumpur trip to tomorrow, but news of yet another suicide bombing at a Russian military hospital in the southern Russian town of Mozdok, near Chechnya, on Friday night that killed 35 people, is causing anxiety.

Russian ambassador to Malaysia, Vladimir Morozov, who lived through the “trauma” of the postponed visits, speaks of “some good” which has come out of it.

“The first time, I was already in Moscow preparing for Dr Mahathir’s visit. And my embassy staff worked very hard to prepare for our president’s planned trip here last

out taking in the wonders of Kuala Lumpur. A short sightseeing tour around the KLCC area has been arranged for him to view the Petronas Twin Towers.

“There may be some countries claiming that their buildings are taller, but we know it is not true,” says Morozov.

The Mahathir-Putin meeting, which will be their fifth since the

Space Agency (NSA) has shown interest to further develop co-operation.

Proof that we are able to cooperate in this area, he says, can be seen in the launch of the Malaysian satellite, TiungSat-1, in September 2000 by a Russian rocket.

“NSA director-general Datuk Dr Mazlan Othman was in Moscow in June to meet with our space and

the Vneshekonombank (Bank of External Trade) of Russia to extend credit to Russian companies involved in the purchase of palm oil with possible counter-trade payment.

“The establishment of the Russia-Malaysia Business Council in February this year is another boost to our economic co-operation. This body is supposed to be the main instrument to mobilise our trade and investment resources,” says Morozov.

Among the Russian enterprises operating here are the Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rosoboron-export, Russian aircraft corporation MiG and the Russian information agency, Novosti.

According to Russian statistics, bilateral trade last year amounted to US\$574mil (RM2.18bil), with Russian exports amounting to US\$346mil (RM1.31 bil).

“Though Malaysia is our biggest trading partner within Asean, I think we can do better. There is so much potential between us, at least US\$1bil (RM3.8bil) should be recorded,” says Morozov, who believes that more Russians were becoming aware of Malaysia’s expertise in the field of electronics.

“I was shopping in Moscow for a watch for my son and a salesgirl was doing her best to sell me a Seiko. She told me that it was made in Malaysia and that products made here were of the highest quality.

“She did not know that I was the Russian ambassador to Malaysia,” he recalls with a laugh.

month," he says in an interview at his residence situated within the embassy grounds in Ampang.

"With the extra time to work on, Dr Mahathir had a very successful trip to Moscow and President Putin is heading here with an even larger business delegation."

Although he will only be staying for one night, Putin will be the first Russian president to set foot in Malaysia, and the third major figure from the "coalition of the unwilling" (those who opposed the US-led military strike on Iraq) to come following the groundbreaking visits of German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and French President Jacques Chirac.

The official programme begins on Tuesday with a meeting between Dr Mahathir and Putin in Putrajaya, followed by a courtesy call by the latter on the King.

The 50-year-old Russian leader will then address the Malaysia-Russia Business Forum at the Kuala Lumpur Shangri-La, and host a Q&A session with Dr Mahathir.

Save for a meeting between Putin and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the original agenda has been retained for the president's rescheduled visit.

Putin will grace a state banquet hosted by the King before leaving for Uzbekistan at about 1 pm, but the excited ambassador is not about to let his boss wave goodbye with-

latter became president in 2000, will not be "for formalities", Morozov stresses.

"Both know each other well and have maintained contact at various international forums. Besides the president wanting to strengthen relations between Russia and Malaysia, he also wants to pay tribute to Dr Mahathir, a prominent leader and nation builder known for his open and bold stance on major regional and global issues," he says.

Putin's delegation will include Industry, Science and Technology Minister Ilya Klebanov, Communications and Information Technology Minister Leonid Reimann, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov, director-general of the Russian Aviation and Space Agency Yury Koptev and chairman of the Russia-Asean Co-operation Fund Dr Vladimir Sautov.

MOUs on science and technology, and information and communication technology, will be signed.

Officials said a US\$900mil (RM3.42bil) deal is also on the table for Russia to supply 18 Sukhoi Su-30MK fighter aircraft to Malaysia.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and his Russian counterpart had, in May, agreed in principle to the deal.

In aviation and aerospace co-operation, Morozov says Russia aspires to help Malaysia "explore" these fields, and Malaysia's National

astronautic authorities," he adds.

Russia is also assisting Malaysia's research designs on the polar zones, with its famed North and South Pole researcher Artur Chilingarov having come here last year to prepare the groundwork.

Polar research was among the projects that Russia had pledged to help Malaysia with during Putin's bilateral meeting with Dr Mahathir in Moscow last March. (Dr Mahathir's trip to Antarctica last year was on board the Russian icebreaker, Captain Dranitsyn.)

Morozov cites the oil and energy sector as another field of bilateral interest, saying that Russia was closely monitoring its development in Malaysia.

"What has impressed us greatly is your Government's privatisation and deregulation strategy. I hope we will be able to co-operate in third countries as we did with Petronas in exploring the oil resources of Iran," he says.

Malaysia-Russia economic ties have got a boost with several financial bodies stepping in to provide help.

In March, Russian state-owned insurance company Ingosstrakh and Malaysian Export Credit insurance Bhd (MECIB) signed an agreement on insurance of external trade operations.

Last year, an agreement was signed between Bank Negara and

Education is another key area of bilateral co-operation that Putin and Dr Mahathir are likely to discuss, according to the ambassador.

"I am particularly happy to note that Russia has become a destination for Malaysian students. The turning point in our educational ties occurred only two years ago, with the official unilateral recognition of diplomas of five Russian medical universities by the Malaysian Government.

"There are now more than 700 Malaysians studying in Russian universities," he says, adding that Russian professors were also teaching at Universiti Malaya, USM, Universiti Tenaga Nasional and Universiti Teknologi Mara.

Morozov, who was posted here on Sept 27, 2000, says he will not rest until another matter is resolved - the restoration of direct airlinks between Moscow and Kuala Lumpur.

Russian airliner Aeroflot scrapped its service to Kuala Lumpur in April 2001.

"It only takes about 10 hours to fly directly from Moscow to KL. Now, it takes up to 20 hours to get here, using other routes from Paris, London, Zurich and Tokyo.

"Time is money for our businessmen. With more Russians eyeing Malaysia, Aeroflot should re-consider," he said.