

Putin wins hearts of Muslim leaders

STAR 17 OCT 2003

PUTRAJAYA: Russian President Vladimir Putin marked his historic presence at the 10th OIC Summit with a surprise appearance as one of the speakers at the opening session.

He won warm applause from leaders of the Muslim world when he, through an interpreter, said terrorism should not be equated to any religion.

"The position of Russia is constant and clear. Terrorism must not be equated to any religion, culture, tradition or any way of life," he said.

Putin is among two leaders from non-member nations who are attending the Summit as guests of Malaysia.

The other is Philippine president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

Putin went on to say that Russia and the Muslim countries could have mutually advantageous co-operation, pointing out the common stand among them that there should be a central United Nations role for settling international problems.

Putin also highlighted the development of the Muslim community in his

country whom he described as an inalienable part of Russia.

He said there were now more than 7,000 mosques in Russia compared to about 700 in 1991. It is reported that there are about 20 million Muslims in Russia.

Putin also said he was grateful to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for inviting him to the opening ceremony of the largest gathering of Muslim leaders.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said the warm welcome that OIC leaders gave Putin was a clear indication for Russia to collaborate and co-operate with the body in the future.

Describing Putin's speech as refreshing, Syed Hamid said Russia's presence at the Summit would allow the body to look into establishing dialogue partnerships with other non-Muslim countries, much like what Asean practised.

"In his speech, he has also touched upon the elements of Islam in his own country," he told reporters after the

conclusion of the first day of the Summit meeting here yesterday.

Asked whether such a relationship with OIC would dilute the composition of the body, Syed Hamid said at present, there were some OIC members who had less of a Muslim population compared to Russia.

To a question, Syed Hamid said giving Putin the floor during the opening gave the president an opportunity to explain Russia's stand on Islam.

"Putin is a guest of Malaysia. After having travelled thousands of miles and patiently waited for hours for the ceremony to begin, we wanted to give him the floor to allow him to speak to the general body," he stressed.

Asked why Putin's speech, which caught many delegates by surprise, was not included in the agenda, Syed Hamid said the president was scheduled to speak.

"But not in the context of the OIC agenda. It was only after the formal opening ceremony had concluded that he spoke," Syed Hamid pointed out.