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Putin impressed by Malaysia's consistency, respect for law

Hardev Kaur

RUSSIAN President Vladimir Putin says he is impressed by the openness of Malaysia's position and the consistency of its stand on national issues, while abiding by the rules of international law.

In an exclusive interview at Novo Ogoryovo, his official residence, outside Moscow, he said Malaysia's adherence to international law and regard for its partners provided a framework to develop its relations with other countries.

He added that it was also a positive development for the formation of a new and necessary world order for the 21st century.

Putin was scheduled to visit Kuala Lumpur today, the first Russian President to do so, but his trip has been postponed following the recent suicide bombing in Moscow.

The President described bilateral relations as "businesslike and amicable" with trade increasing by 34 per cent last year.

He said that several areas of cooperation were being explored. Among them were civil aviation, space exploration, including putting a Malaysian astronaut into space, energy and electronics.

Putin noted that Malaysia had made a quantum leap in the last 20 years under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and outlined areas in which "Malaysia can become a bridge for our business activities in the Asia and Pacific region".

During his visit to Moscow last year, Dr Mahathir had offered Malaysia as a base for Russian companies, businesses and industries to tap the Asean market.

Putin, who took a strong stand on the invasion of Iraq, said Russia strongly supported the strengthening of international organisations.

"If unilateralism were the norm of international life, it would lead to chaos and catastrophe," he warned.

In the hour-long interview, Putin also spoke of his hopes and aspirations for Russia, adding that the Government was committed to doubling the gross domestic product within 10 years and reducing poverty.

"A country cannot be called prosperous if the majority of its population continue to fight poverty. And to have the right to be called a prosperous state we need to improve the living standards of the population."

Looking fresh despite a busy and long day, Putin also spoke of the need to combat corruption and improve the business climate for both local and foreign investors. Among the areas being tackled are strengthening legislation, guaranteeing the rights of investors and owners, tax reform, improving the accounting standards, the judicial system and security.

He is committed to market reforms and emphasised that "the state should get out of areas where it should not be in".

Putin, Volodya to his friends, has many views that are similar to Dr Mahathir's, among them on terrorism. Both point to the need to tackle the root causes of terrorism. "If we don't simply want to scratch the surface we should tackle the roots of terrorism."

Like Dr Mahathir, he identified poverty and inequality as being among the causes that need to be addressed.

He said the slogan "Clash of Civilisations" was a dangerous one and pointed out that as human beings, "we have to learn how to respect each other and the interests of others".

Putin said Russia was a multiracial and multireligious country with a

majority Christian population, and about 20 million Muslims.

"They are not immigrants who came to our country from other states. These are Russians. These are people who consider Russia their motherland. And in this particular sense, we can say without any hesitation that Russia is a part of the Muslim world."

Since Russia stretches across both the Asian and European continents, Putin said Moscow derived benefits from the wealth of the "huge oriental state".

"No matter what roots feed us the Asian roots or the European roots - we are trying to utilise all for the benefit and for the development of the country."

He said that the only universal organisation which could solve issues of a global nature was the United Nations.

Asked about Russia as a counterforce to the US as the world's only super-power, Putin pointed out that today both Russia and the US were the "most powerful nuclear powers in the world."

In the provision of global stability, the role of Russia and the US was important. He also said that no state should ignore the interests of its partners.