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New dimension in Malaysia-Russia ties

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THE Russian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur has been a hive of activity since news from Moscow a few days ago that President Vladimir Putin could be arriving early next month on his first official visit to Malaysia.

Every member of the staff can be expected to be roped into the task of ensuring that the Russian leader's stay in the country is comfortable, and memorable for the right reasons.

Marshalling them is ambassador Vladimir Morozov who is determined that everything should go well.

The landmark visit is expected to take relations between the only country that can be labelled a super power - after the United States - and Malaysia to a new dimension.

Morozov's anxiety is natural and to be expected. The visit of a head of government can rattle even the most seasoned head of mission, what more a first-time ambassador barely 21 years into office.

The logistics involving the delegation of several hundreds, including several ministers, businessmen and the media have the makings of a nightmare. The jitters, notwithstanding, Morozov is pleased that Putin has placed Malaysia on his official schedule.

"It is very pleasant work for me (preparing for the visit). As ambassador, it would be very useful if he is here longer so that I can show him KL and other areas like Langkawi," he said in a recent interview.

Putin's visit is important as it comes in the wake of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Russia last year where he made a speech that probably set the tone for Malaysian-Russian relations in the 21st century.

The Russian President and members of his delegation can be expected to come with concrete proposals to help the 36-year-old relationship transcend traditional areas of co-operation.

Expected to top the agenda is the creation of better mutual understanding between Malaysian and Russian entrepreneurs in the existing climate for business in both countries, a major impediment in the past to successful trade relations.

Several agreements are expected to be signed in areas like science and technology, economics, culture, education, aerospace, aviation and biotechnology.

Malaysia-Russia relations were fast-forwarded recently after three meetings between Dr Mahathir and Putin, the first in 2000.

Morozov described their last meeting in Evian earlier this month at the enlarged dialogue ahead of the summit of the Group of Eight as one akin to that of old friends.

There are several commonalities between the two nations including their stand on international issues like the invasion of Iraq and the issue of international terrorism.

Morozov said both countries might also be looking at a smart partnership for the commercialisation of technologies including bio-technology.

Malaysia is Russia's largest trading partner among Asean member nations, registering a bilateral trade balance of RM2.18 billion last year.

"Thus, both countries have worked hard to achieve the target of US\$500 million (RM1.9 billion) in bilateral trade that both Putin and Dr Mahathir wanted when they met in Moscow last year."

But this is not enough for Morozov who is worried that the lack of

information has, to some extent, undermined the nascent trade relationship between the two countries.

The Bahasa Malaysia idiom Tak kenal maka tak cinta (lack of appreciation due to unfamiliarity) comes immediately to mind in describing the situation. It is for this reason that the Malaysia-Russia Business Council was established last year and tasked with promoting private business partnerships.

"We want to encourage greater contact between Russian and Malaysian businessmen. The visit proves that Russia views Malaysia as a prospective and reliable partner, and a dynamic member of the global community and Asean grouping," he said.

The above remark is from a printed statement that Morozov's staff have prepared to augment the interview.

Despite being in the post-Perestroika area with all its trappings of a typical 21st century society, some things are perhaps not easily forgotten like the Russian propensity to stick to the script.

Or the cautious manner in which visitors are screened before being allowed into the compound that is a veritable oasis of calm beside chaotic Jalan Ampang.

But even this is a blessing if one harks back to the days of the Soviet Union when few Malaysians ventured beyond the walled perimeters of the Russian Embassy.

Not that anyone wanted to, given the fact that communist embassies were off-limits by mutual consent between Malaysia and the Governments concerned.

For a little while in the early 1980s, bilateral relations sank to its nadir after the infamous affair which saw a senior civil servant accused of spying for the Soviet Union. Things certainly have changed since then. Today, the relationship has progressed beyond such suspicion to a new level of trust and mutual respect.

The advent of the free market economy becoming a pillar of Russian society has also led to an unprecedented openness among Russians here, and indeed, elsewhere worldwide.

There is more to Morozov than meets the eye. He is not the typical plenipotentiary "parachuted" into the country as envoy.

He has a comprehensive knowledge of the region, most of it first-hand. The 53-year-old served in Jakarta for 13 years over three instalments. And he speaks fluent Bahasa Indonesia, and by extension, Bahasa Malaysia.

To top it off, his thesis for his diploma in 1972 was Soviet Union-Malaysia relations.

"I find that I have got a better feel of the country by reading Bahasa Malaysia newspapers here. It helps me get a deeper understanding of the people and issues of the day," he said.

Ever the pragmatist, Morozov tries to improve his Bahasa Malaysia by speaking to Malaysians in the language, but has been rebuffed on most occasions.

"Almost all the Malaysians I meet reply in English when I speak to them in Bahasa Malaysia. I just don't understand this," he added, with a tone of resignation.

His daughter, Katerina Morozova, who was born in Jakarta, can be expected to follow in his footsteps, at least as far as Bahasa Malaysia is concerned.

She is studying it as a subject at a local college before proceeding next year to Australia for a degree course.

"I want her to be with us for at least a year before she goes on to university abroad. It will help her to acclimatise herself to being independent," said the father of two, flashing a glimpse of the man behind

the official persona.

His son, also Vladimir Morozov, has followed in his father's footsteps, going into the Russian Foreign Ministry in Moscow soon after university.

Morozov is in his element as he narrates how Malaysia is so well-known in Russia today, at least among television viewers who are glued to the television when The Last Hero comes on air.

He and wife, Helena, are no exception. They view the Robin Crusoe-like series filmed in Pulau Besar via Russian satellite television. Conversely, Malaysians are getting to Russia via education.

"Russia has become a destination for Malaysian medical and pharmacy students," he said, adding that there were nearly 800 medical students in five Russian universities.

Some of the attractions in Russia are the low tuition fees and living costs which compare well even with reasonably cheap countries for medical education like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

He talks of bringing Russia closer home to Malaysia by establishing a branch campus of a Russian university here to offer a twinning programme of sorts.

But all's not as well as it could be, complains Morozov. It appears that some quarters involved in the process of facilitating entry of Malaysian students into Russian universities have come under fire for indulging in questionable practices.

"I shall not conceal the fact that the promotion of Russian education is not a smooth process as we have been facing negative reports caused by some intermediaries' unfair practices," he said.

There is so much more to ask Morozov but he begs off pleading a busy day ahead. Hardly surprising, with a presidential visit on the cards.