

06/08/2003

Towards closer ties with Russia (HL)

Ramlan Said; Firdaus Abdullah

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Russian President Vladimir Putin's landmark visit to Malaysia signifies an important step towards greater co-operation between the two countries, especially in economy and aerospace technology transfer.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was upbeat over bilateral relations, said today he believed ties between the two countries would be even better with the visit, first by a Russian head of state.

After being bestowed the "Orden Drusby" award, Russia's highest state award by Putin at the Prime Minister's Office in Putrajaya, Dr Mahathir said:

"Of late, ties between Malaysia and Russia have been enhanced and both nations are enjoying even more friendly relations. For Malaysia, we want to be friendly with all nations regardless of ideology and policy."

Historically, Dr Mahathir said, Malaysia at one time could not agree with Russia because its policies conflicted with Malaysia.

But times had changed, he said, and Malaysia now looked up to Russia to play a bigger role, especially in endearing itself to smaller nations that had been distanced as a result of the Cold War.

In conferring the award, Putin said it was a sign of recognition to Dr Mahathir for his efforts in strengthening ties between the two countries.

"I am giving you this award and wish you and the whole of Malaysia prosperity."

Putin said the award also signified the respect of the Russian Government for Dr Mahathir who has fought for equal dissemination of benefits for the civilisation of the world.

The words of mutual praise are natural coming from two leaders who share similar views on a number of international issues such as the need to address the root causes of terrorism, the dangers of a unipolar world, and respect for the sovereignty of nations.

Both leaders also attended the Malaysia-Russia Business Forum at the Shangri-La Hotel where the Russian leader was staying.

They launched the Malaysia-Russia Business Council as well as gave their endorsement to three agreements on co-operation in communications, defence and science and technology.

The forum zeroed in on business and economic co-operation in aviation, banking and finance, medical, tourism, science and technology, and trade and investments.

Its aim is to build on the successful Malaysia-Russia business forum in Moscow during Dr Mahathir's visit last year.

Delegates also identified specific business and investment opportunities, both in Malaysia and Russia for Malaysian and Russian businessmen, to promote smart partnerships between the two business communities.

Earlier, at Parliament Square, Putin was given a state welcome. He was greeted on arrival by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin.

He then inspected a guard of honour mounted by 103 officers and men from the 1st Battalion of the Royal Malay Regiment and was given a 21-gun salute.

Ministers, including Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and Dewan Negara President Tan Sri Dr Abdul Hamid Pawanteh were introduced to the Russian President.

While security was understandably tight, with helicopters circling overhead and Putin being virtually dwarfed by the towering security detail all over six feet tall, the state of heightened alert did not affect the prevailing warm atmosphere.

This mood was felt not just at Parliament House, but also during talks between Dr Mahathir and Putin, and at the forum.

Members of Putin's delegation chatted amicably with Malaysian officials and businessmen.

Noted a Malaysian businessman: "Both Dr Mahathir and President Putin would be touched by the sight of their countrymen engaging each other in a positive and productive way.

"It only goes to show how warm ties between leaders, both on the personal and official levels, can help bring people together."

Language proved to be no barrier as both sides, prior to the arrival of Dr Mahathir and Putin, engaged in business matchmaking and partnering.

Ties are expected to be stronger now with the country's purchase of Russian Sukhoi fighter jets. Russia has also played a big role in helping Malaysia launch itself into the aerospace industry and with the training of Malaysian cosmonauts.