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FAA certification a breakthrough for aviation sector

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DURING the third Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace (LIMA) exhibition in 1995, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had announced the formulation of a national aerospace policy to ensure orderly growth of the industry.

Dr Mahathir said then that "it is timely for Malaysia to embark on the manufacture of parts, engine and avionic components and training."

Since the announcement, there had been no write-ups on the blueprint.

Attempts by Business Times to secure interviews on the national aerospace policy proved futile although this paper was told that the Malaysia-Industry Group for High Technology (Might) had completed their task in drawing up the blueprint and submitted it to Dr Mahathir in October last year.

It was indeed hush-hush. Until last Tuesday, that is, when Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik - at an "important briefing" on the current developments in the aviation industry - announced that Malaysia, under the aviation blueprint, will progress from merely servicing and maintenance of aircraft into a manufacturer and exporter of aircraft, components and parts.

This progression is made possible following the conclusion of negotiations on the Implementation Procedures Agreement (IPA) between the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) and the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

The IPA - which will be inked between DCA and FAA on November 3 - provides for technical and procedural acceptance by the FAA of a Malaysian design and manufactured metal aircraft, up to 12,500 lbs weight with a maximum seating capacity of nine passengers.

It also provides acceptance of 129 aircraft appliances manufactured in Malaysia that meet the FAA technical standards order, including aircraft tyres of Malaysian design and manufacture.

It is a success of sorts for Malaysia. Last year, Malaysia signed with the US the Bilateral Aviation Safety Agreement (BASA), which accords recognition for the Malaysia aviation industry by the US. The IPA enables the country to become an original equipment manufacturer in the aviation industry.

In the aviation industry, getting recognition from the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is like getting a "licence" to access the world market. With FAA certification, a company can sell aircraft or aircraft parts and components not only to the US market but also supply to the world market.

The Transport Ministry and the DCA had put in a lot of work towards this end, realising that Malaysian companies would need to have FAA certification if the aircraft and aircraft components and parts, manufactured in the country, is to be internationally accepted.

Dr Ling has described the process of aircraft certification and manufacturing as "an arduous journey."

If one is to track the progress of Malaysia's aviation industry, it would show that the country ventured into aircraft manufacturing long before BASA was signed.

It was at the first LIMA in 1991 when Composite Technology Research Malaysia (CTRM) announced participation in the production of the Eagle aircraft in partnership with an Australian company.

In 1993, Malaysia took over the whole company and the first production model of the Eagle rolled out of the Australian facility in Perth in October the same year.

CTRM is expected to produce Malaysia's first designed and manufactured composite-based aircraft in the country by the year 2000.

The company is currently being evaluated by DCA for "A1 primary company" status, which has already been accorded to SME Aviation.

The industry's progress, however, was not without turbulence and bad weather.

The first made-in-malaysia aircraft could have come from the Malaysia-German joint venture to produce the Dornier Seastar CD2 aircraft. If things had gone well, the amphibious aircraft would have rolled out of the the Bayan Lepas Industrial Zone in Penang in 1994.

But it was not meant to be. The joint venture' local partner, Shapadu Corp Sdn Bhd, said the project was "grounded before it could even take off because of many technical problems."

Shapadu, however, is not disheartened. It has clinched a joint venture deal with Australia's Howard Hughes Engineering Pty Ltd to manufacture and operate the ALW 2000 light wing aircraft in Malaysia.

Shapadu group executive chairman Datuk Shahrani Abdullah said the company plans to set up the manufacturing plant near the Batu Berendam Airport in Malacca. If everything goes as planned, the company's first fully locally-manufactured light aircraft will be rolled out next year.

SME Aviation would be the company that will place Malaysia in the world map of aircraft manufacturers when it receives on November 3 the country's first type certificate and production approval certificate for its MD3-160 two-seater aircraft.

It will be the first type certificate to be issued for an aircraft under Malaysian design control. The product approval certificate will also be the first granted to a Malaysian company for the manufacture of aircraft.

This, according to Dr Ling, is a breakthrough for the aviation industry. Indeed, this is something Malaysia and Malaysians can be proud of.

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