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Lima '97 set to post a string of firsts

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WHEN one flies into Langkawi, one sees it immediately: a line of stunning-looking jets gleaming at one end of the airport which gives this picturesque island a prosperous feel.

Totalling nine, this aircraft belong to the British Royal Air Force Red Arrows Hawk Aerobatic Team, and are part of the "wares" in this year's Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (Lima '97).

Indeed, other exhibitors at the six-day aerospace exhibition are also expected to display their respective aircraft, each claiming to be more powerful and better than the other.

They include big international aircraft makers such as British Aerospace, Airbus Industrie, Boeing, Bell Helicopter and Bombardier, just to name a few.

But to be sure, the Red Arrows Hawk Aerobatic Team, which is world-renowned for its death-defying manoeuvres, is one programme which visitors to Lima '97 will look forward to.

Another interesting exhibit at the aerospace exhibition is the Netherlands Air Force's Crossair aircraft, which is also known as the "flying hospital" because of its fully-equipped medical facilities on board.

In an interview with Business Times in Langkawi, Lima '97 organiser Le Proton Lima Sdn Bhd executive director Mohd Yusof Manan said this year's exhibition is unique compared to previous years as the maritime and aerospace displays are held at different venues in Langkawi.

The aerospace exhibition, for example, is being held at the Mahsuri International Exhibition Centre which is located just next to the airport.

Mohd Yusof said the six-day exhibition promises to bring Malaysia abreast with fast-moving changes in the aerospace world.

"This year, a record 620 exhibitors from 40 countries are participating in the aerospace exhibition which opens tomorrow," he said.

More than 5,000 people comprising trade visitors as well as the public are expected to attend the aerospace exhibition daily.

But behind all the buzz, something real is brewing. It is expected that Lima '97 will generate 16 memorandums of understanding (MOUs) from the aerospace business alone during the six-day period.

"Of the total, four are confirmed to be signed," he said. However, he declined to disclose the projected worth of sales resulting from the MOUs.

"Looking at the present economic situation in the world, we hope to achieve sales equal if not more to that of Lima '95," Mohd Yusof added.

A stroll through the exhibition centre yesterday saw many faithful international aircraft makers holding tight to bullish sales projections for Lima '97. Still, Asia's economic problems could put a crimp on many Malaysian companies' spendings.

Nevertheless, the aerospace exhibition has received enormous coverage in the media and much more will be written and said about it in the days to come.

Can Lima '97 possibly live up to the hype? With the number of exhibitors continuing to climb, there seems to be no reason to doubt that.

By all accounts though, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has moved forcefully to bring the biennial exhibition up to speed.

In fact, Langkawi has benefited from the support of the Government and the industry since 1991, when Lima was first introduced with only 98

exhibitors from 14 countries.

Today, the increased number of resort hotels, restaurants and international exhibition centre and an international airport provide good examples of that.

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