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Obstacles must be removed for our aviation industry to take off

Ashraf Abdullah; Sufi Yusof

AFTER several false starts, the Oshkosh East Fly-in Convention and Exhibition, another brainchild of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, was finally held in Langkawi.

Modelled after the Oshkosh Fly-In in Wisconsin, the United States, the Oshkosh East was mainly to generate interest among young Malaysians to take up flying - seen as a beneficial past time for both individuals and the nation, which is seeking a respectable position in the world of aviation.

Flying as a recreational activity is relatively new in Malaysia and only a handful of youths in Malaysia have actually taken it up as a hobby.

When opening the event on Monday, the Prime Minister urged Malaysians to develop the culture of flying and to indulge in understanding aircraft mechanics.

"We want to stimulate interest in flying, especially among the young, but beyond that we want to stimulate interest in constructing, understanding how aircraft are built, designed and how they fly and how to control the aircraft.

"We Malaysians in particular are way behind many countries," he said.

Dr Mahathir hoped that such recreational flying habits could eventually lead to production of components and, subsequently, the manufacture of Malaysia's own airplanes.

"When we start with light aircraft, flying becomes much easier later on," he said.

But the problems confronting aspiring pilots are complex and multi-fold. They range from exorbitant training fees to inadequate airstrips for light aircraft.

These were compounded by high price of aircraft fuel as well as buying and maintaining the airplane itself.

"Although commercial banks in Malaysia have been reminded several times by the Prime Minister that they have to take risks in order to progress, they have not come up with a special scheme to provide loans for those interested in buying light aircraft.

"Aircraft are seen as high risk machines. Yet they are safer than cars. Even Dr Mahathir said more people die on the road. Yet insurance companies prefer to stay away," says Sabaruddin Ariffin, a member of the Kedah Flying Club, who is also a pilot.

Take, for instance, the Kedah Flying Club's sole Cessna 172 which costs about RM500,000, - far beyond the reach of most enthusiasts.

Due to such high cost and the lack of financing schemes, Sabaruddin said it was impossible for the club to expand its wings, except to hope for generous wealthy individuals to donate their flying machines for the club's activities.

An aircraft distributor, Luigi Guarino, was also of the same opinion.

"How many people can actually cough up a huge amount of money, just to buy an airplane? If banks can give out loans for cars, why not airplanes, some of which are much cheaper.

"There is also the question of insurance which needs to be worked out," he said.

Meanwhile, an aircraft manufacturer, who declined to be identified, said local insurance companies merely acted as brokers for overseas insurance firms such as Lloyd's of London.

"No local insurance firm is willing to provide cover for airplanes due to its misconception that the activity involves high risks," he said.

Sabaruddin says an aircraft was required to undergo stringent tests after every 20 hours of flying before the Department of Civil Aviation issued a Certificate of Airworthiness.

At RM275 an hour, his club offers the lowest training fees. However, this was still expensive and only the privileged few could afford it.

Some of the flying clubs in Malaysia charge more than RM500 for an hour's training.

As the Kedah Flying Club offered a much lower rate and had waived the RM60 per hour fees for ground school which aspiring pilots have to first undergo, enthusiasts as far as from Europe and India have enrolled.

This goes to show that there was a market for flying schools and, if the Government or even the private sector could come up with a way to reduce the fees, Malaysia could even become a centre for pilot training, especially for those from less-developed nations.

But first, the obstacles have to be removed.

One of the most basic issues was the price of Avgas or aircraft fuel, which most in the industry say must be reviewed.

Currently, it costs about RM2.60 per litre which they say was "ridiculously expensive", especially since Petronas, Malaysia's own petroleum company, was producing it.

With limited funds, flying clubs in Malaysia were also finding it difficult to sustain their operations as well as expand, given the high price tag on airplanes.

Sabaruddin said the Government should also seriously consider constructing airstrips for light aircraft - one in every district, if possible.

Most airstrips in the country are currently being used by commercial aircraft.

Without more such facilities as well as a total review of the role of the supporting industries, Malaysia's aviation industry can expect to face strong headwind and turbulence, before it can even get off the ground.

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