

08/12/1997

Aerospace industry blueprint launching high point of Lima '97

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THE fourth Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition ended yesterday, capping six days of spectacular aerial displays, signing of memoranda of understanding and agreements, and aircraft purchases.

However, Lima '97 will go down in history for being the launch pad of the Government's national aerospace industry blueprint.

Launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the blueprint will ensure an orderly and systematic development of the aerospace industry.

At the same time Khazanah Nasional Berhad, the Government's investment arm, and British Aerospace Plc announced a cooperation agreement which will pave the way for the former's wholly-owned aerospace group, SME Technologies, to have access to international aircraft manufacturing work.

The two developments have been much-awaited since the Government announced in 1995 that it was determined to play a key role in the development of the aerospace industry.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said that the blueprint was crucial to the Government's efforts to ensure that the maritime and aerospace industries contribute to the country's prosperity and growth in the 21st century.

"In fact, we see the aerospace and maritime industries as the two main catalysts of growth for the economy in the 21st century. The other is Information Technology," he said.

He added a fully developed aerospace industry had numerous direct and indirect benefits.

"What many do not realise is that the aviation and space sub-sectors are more technologically-intensive than any other form of manufacturing in the country," said Syed Hamid.

He believed that the Malaysian aerospace industry had come a long way since local companies began to venture into activities like servicing and overhauling of aircraft.

However, he regretted that although more than 20 years had passed, the industry had yet to boast of any achievement. "It is neither in its infancy nor has it matured yet."

An aviation analyst, who did not want to be identified, concurred with the Minister's view.

"The Malaysian aerospace industry's level of technological achievement is limited to aircraft repairs, selected manufacturing of parts and components and the assembly of light aircraft.

"What we have achieved now is merely setting up companies to provide the supporting services to aerospace hardware now in use in the country," said the analyst.

According to officials of the Malaysian Industry Government Group for High Technology, the coordinating body which submitted the blueprint to the Government, there was no synergy among the key players in the local aerospace industry.

What the industry needs to do now is to consolidate and expand, said Syed Hamid.

"We believe there are five main areas which the industry should actively develop and promote.

"These are overhaul and maintenance, manufacture and assembly of light aircraft, manufacture of parts and components, modification and conversion

work and the manufacturing of composite parts," said Syed Hamid.

Mike Mendoza, the director of British Aerospace's Malaysia operations, said the blueprint had taken together all the elements that were needed to make the industry viable and dynamic.

"We have the two councils, one outlining the direction of the industry, and the other to handle specifically the development of the industry," he said.

He expected the Government to invest in aerospace infrastructural development and manpower training, while the private sector would concentrate on developing the industry.

Mendoza was referring to the establishment of the National Aerospace Council and the National Aerospace Co-ordinating Body.

He was optimistic that BAE would be able to provide Malaysia with access to aerospace technologies to further develop the local industry.

Lima '97 also saw the announcement on the establishment of the Aerospace University, another significant step in the building of manpower to create a pool of experts in the industry.

This much awaited set-up will offer local and international students diploma, bachelor's and post graduate degrees in aerospace engineering and technology.

Currently institutions of higher learning do offer courses related to aerospace studies. However, demand outstrips supply.

This has led to the private sector pinching staff from the Royal Malaysian Air Force.

While it may be good news for the industry and the economy, it is bad news for the RMAF, especially when it has invested considerably to train its engineers, technicians and pilots.

With the setting up of the university, it is hoped that the manpower needs of the aerospace industry will be structured to keep up with the technological developments expected to be introduced to the industry in the near future.

On the business side, Lima '97 had shown a lot of maturity among the industries, both in the aerospace and maritime sectors.

While memoranda of understanding used to be the catchword, now a majority of signing ceremonies involve concrete joint venture agreements.

Among the notable ones is CTRM's appointment as a Lockheed-Martin service centre for CF-6 engines and as Proton's vendor for the manufacturing of the Lotus Elise body shell.

On the maritime side, PSC-Naval Dockyard Sdn Bhd stole the limelight when it unveiled its locally manufactured 105mm light-field guns for the army, in collaboration with BAE's Royal Ordnance.

Both the organisers of the aerospace and maritime shows, Le Proton Lima Sdn Bhd and Huswah Exhibition, must be commended for their effort in making a success of the biennial event.

However, there is still a lot that needs to be done to ensure the two events are sustained and promoted, especially in maintaining close coordination between the two organisers.

Syed Hamid, who had admitted shortcomings in the organisation, had pledged to overcome them before Lima '99.

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