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Tradition, aerial wizardry at launch

POMP, tradition and aerial wizardry were united when the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition was launched at the Mahsuri International Exhibition Centre yesterday.

The ceremony began with the arrival of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, both of whom were driven straight to the centre after their executive jet touched down at the Langkawi International Airport.

Welcomed by Defence Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Le Proton Lima Sdn Bhd executive chairman Datuk Radzi Manan, the couple were escorted by a phalanx of traditional dancers and musicians into the main hall.

As they stepped into the hall, the throbbing sound of the rebana (drums) stopped momentarily.

Several dancers led Dr Mahathir and his wife to their seats before they regrouped with their colleagues on stage.

There was an appreciative silence among the 1,800-strong invited guests as the dancers performed on stage, moving gracefully to the beats of drums and the plaintive voice of a lone singer.

After speeches by Radzi, Syed Hamid, and finally, Dr Mahathir, the hall darkened momentarily.

Then the roaring sound of a jet engine blasted from the sound system, a telling contrast from the culture and tradition shown at the beginning of the ceremony.

On the three large screens set up around the hall to enable the audience to view the proceedings, images of an aircraft and its cockpit were flashed before the audio effects changed to the sound of a submarine emerging from the water.

A video presentation followed, kicking off with a montage of the many aircraft, helicopters and ships that have taken part in the Lima shows.

There was also a short documentary on the history of the Lima exhibition, its progress over the years and the booming effect it has had on the island's development.

Dr Mahathir was then escorted to a viewing gallery on the second floor facing the tarmac, where he was able to view a 73-minute aerial display involving some 32 aircraft from Malaysia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Russia.

The blazing sunlight, which had scorched traders, the Press and organisers during the run-up to the event with merciless intensity, made an uncannily-timed exit just minutes into the aerial show, allowing the crowd some respite from the heat.

The Royal Malaysian Air Force's four aerobatic teams involving the FA/18Ds, MiG-29s, F5Es, and Hawks, took to the skies first, along with an RF-5E aircraft. An F-16, K-Max heavy lift helicopter and IL 76 aircraft also took part, weaving their way in an impressive display of aerial agility.

The United Kingdom's Royal Air Force Aerobatic Team, the Red Arrows, had the longest time slot and captivated the crowd during their 29-minute display of tight manoeuvring and precise flying.

The Benson and Hedges Golden Dreams aerobatic team also scored points with their deft moves, which included daredevil loops.

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