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Year-ender (Defence)

CLOSURE OF AIRSPACE ADDS COLOUR DEFENCE ISSUES FOR YEAR

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's move to ban Singapore Air Force aircraft from Malaysian airspace and the withdrawal from a joint exercise of the Five Power Defence Arrangement were the main defence issues of the country for the year.

On the whole, the country did not witness many front-page events or concern in defence, except probably for the export of the first Malaysian-made aircraft, SME MD3-160, to the United States on Dec. 1, which marked a new era in the nation's aviation industry, especially when the aircraft are now used by the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF).

The announcement by Defence Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar on Sept 17 that the ban on SAF aircraft from Malaysian airspace effective the following day came as a bombshell not only for the island republic but also for the political and security analysts of the region.

The Kuala Lumpur decision based on its security interest, appeared to have taken a different "political tone" when it was linked to the publication of the memoirs of Singapore's senior minister Lee Kuan Yew who claimed that the state was bullied by Malaysia during the two years when it was a part of the federation and that several Malaysian leaders were connected with the racial riots in the island in 1964.

"This is not an easy decision ... it is made in the interest of Malaysia," said Syed Hamid who cited, among others, the increasing overcrowding of the Malaysian airspace and the concern of the public, as reasons for the ban.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the ban was permanent although there was room for cooperation between the two neighbours.

For the people living in southern Johor coast, the news came as a relief because they had long suffered from the deafening din of the Singapore jetfighters, not to mention their safety as there were several crashes in the past. With the ban, Singapore looked to other countries for their airforce training.

The republic now has to ask for prior permission for using Malaysian airspace, not like before when it was given special exemptions.

Singapore claimed that the ban, the first since the island state separated from Malaysia on Aug. 9, 1965, had been imposed without prior consultation and would affect its search and rescue operations (SRO).

And the Singapore allegation that Malaysia delayed the approval for Singapore Air Force to use the airspace to rescue the crew members of a Royal British Navy helicopter that crashed into the South China Sea during an exercise on Sept 23, strained the ties even further.

This dispute between the two countries did not end by itself, when Malaysia charged that it had solid evidence to show that the Singapore Air Force had violated Malaysian airspace six times since the ban, but Singapore denied the accusations.

The issue however cooled down when Dr Mahathir met his Singapore opposite, Goh Chok Tong, on Nov 5. Dr Mahathir said after the meeting that they agreed that the Malaysian authorities would give prompt approval for SRO but Singapore would still have to apply for prior approval.

Earlier in mid-August, the Far Eastern Economic Review reported Syed Hamid as saying that Malaysia's withdrawal from the land, sea and air exercises of the FPDA this year was a bitter test of the arrangement that

was set up by Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore during the Cold War era 27 years ago.

But Malaysia had cited cost and the economic recession for her first withdrawal from the exercises since 1971 when they were meant to protect the two Southeast Asian countries from the communist threat.

Because of the Malaysian decision, the maritime and air exercises of the FPDA, "Exercise Stardex", did not proceed.

The year also said several air crashes, though involving fewer loss of lives and aircraft than the previous years.

A MIG-29 N jetfighter crashed on Sept 3, but its pilot escaped unhurt. However, it was the first crash of the MIG since 18 of them were bought from Russia in 1994.

Then, on Sept 10, a Hawk-208 jetfighter went down near Gua Musang in Kelantan, killing its pilot, Kapt Jaidev Biaspal. The following month, a MB-339 Aermacchi trainer aircraft crashed in Hutan Piah, Perak, and the instructor escaped.

Notable among the accidents sustained by the Armed Forces personnel for the year was the tragic death of Sjn (U) Ali Ahmad, a parachute instructor and trainee Pranita Awanis Othman when their chutes failed during a training exercise at Kem Trendak, Melaka, on July 31.

An officer of TLDM, Lt. Komander Arshad Ibrahim died during a diving exercise at the New Zealand military base in Auckland on July 16.

On a brighter note, the armed forces celebrated its 65th anniversary this year, while some of its members were a credit to the force for their achievement. Among them is Sapok Biki who won the first gold for boxing for the nation during the 16th Commonwealth Games. Mohd Emran Zakaria contributed two silver for shooting in the same games.

The nation also hosted two defence exhibitions successfully, the 6th Defence Services Asia exhibition in April and the Heli-Asia expo in October. The two trade shows attracted more than 700 companies from 60 nations.

Meanwhile, TLDM moved forward in its modernisation programme when it commissioned its hydrography vessel, KD Perantau, costing RM100 million, on Oct 2.

The year also saw the armed forces personnel more involved in their peace time role, especially in checking the illegal entry of immigrants, sending two C-130 aircraft to Jakarta to bring home Malaysians stranded in the bloody riots of the neighbouring country and the cloud-seeding operations to induce rain during the water shortage last April.

The official disbanding of the Malcon V team on July 18, marked the end of Malaysia's involvement in the UN peace-keeping duties in Bosnia-Herzegovina. That special UN mission involved 10,514 Malaysian armed forces personnel and cost the government about RM1 billion to enforce peace in that country.

There was also a changing of guards for the year when Jen Datuk Seri Mohd Zahidi Zainuddin was appointed chief of the armed forces, replacing Jen Tan Sri Ismail Omar who is retiring in a couple of days.

In the reshuffle, Lt Jen Datuk Md Hashim Hussein was made army chief, while Laksamana Madya Datuk Abu Bakar Abdul Jamal took over as navy chief, replacing Laksamana Madya Datuk Seri Ahmad Ramli Mohd Noor who retired.

With the economic downturn, the Defence Ministry's budget was scaled down by 21 percent. This was said to have an effect on the planning of the armed forces, especially on the modernisation of the army and the purchase of helicopter gunships, but the Mindef has given the assurance that efforts to raise the quality and professionalism of the military would not be impeded.

The recent announcement that a total of 23 battalions of the infantry

corp would be standardized, was in line with the effort to enhance the efficiency of the army and marked another milestone for the defence of the nation for the year. -- Bernama

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