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LIMA '99 a true millennium event

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THE Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace (LIMA) 1999 show, the fifth in the series, drew to a close yesterday, but not before fully justifying its billing as a "true millennium event".

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who opened the show on Wednesday fresh from winning a mandate to lead the country into the new millennium, was openly happy with the way LIMA has gone from strength to strength since the first show in 1991.

"I am in awe of this achievement," he told a press conference after touring the aerospace exhibits at the Mahsuri International Exhibition Centre (MIEC).

"It has been worthwhile. I didn't think the progress could be this fast... faster than my expectations."

Indeed, LIMA has earned international recognition as a major biennial aerospace and maritime event where exhibitors and traders from all over the world converge every two years to showcase or shop for state-of-the-art defence and commercial products and services.

From a giant makeshift tent at LIMA 1991, the exhibits and participants have, since the third LIMA, been ushered into the RM33 million MIEC, itself a state-of-the-art facility.

In 1991, the organisers reported RM100 million in sales, not quite bad for a maiden effort. Then in 1993, it doubled to RM200 million.

For the third show in 1995, 640 companies from 35 countries made their way to Langkawi, and they were well rewarded for their effort. An estimated RM700 million worth of aircraft deals were made and at least 17 agreements with a prospective investment of more than RM2 billion signed.

Then in 1997, LIMA attracted a record 784 exhibitors from over 40 countries, and 21,000 trade and 87,000 public visitors.

This year's aerospace segment, as in the previous four events, was organised by Le Proton LIMA Sdn Bhd. It attracted participants from about 30 countries. The maritime segment was handled by HWA LIMA Sdn Bhd and it drew the participation of 20 countries.

This is no mean feat considering the region has just weathered one of its fiercest economic challenges in decades.

The attractions at LIMA 1999 were many but Airbus Industrie's model A340-500 aircraft which bore the Malaysia Airlines livery was probably the most talked about while Datuk Azhar Mansor's Jalur Gemilang was the most photographed.

The model Airbus created a stir at MIEC, not least through the impression that the national carrier had placed an order for the new aircraft. The Jalur Gemilang, anchored at the Porto Malai jetty, meanwhile received due reverence from local visitors for being the latest piece of Malaysia's maritime history.

It was the vessel in which Azhar became the first person to sail solo round the world eastbound earlier this year.

At LIMA 1999, four aerospace contracts and one partnership agreement were inked between Malaysian companies and their foreign counterparts, and so were at least 13 maritime deals, mostly by Business Focus and its subsidiaries with foreign parties.

The two industries were, however, not the only direct beneficiaries of the six-day event. Like on previous occasions, the island's commercial sector did roaring business.

Hotels reported 100 per cent occupancy.

The four-floor Helang Hotel - a favourite among aerospace exhibitors, the press and other visitors because it is located next to the MIEC - is but one example. In-between LIMAs, it opens only two floors and maintains a limited number of staff.

The foodstalls and restaurants, especially along Pantai Cenang, were full every night in the past week. Companies and individuals also made money from vehicle rentals.

Kuah town was "invaded" by locals and foreigners looking for bargains - among other things electrical items, pots and pans, tableware, perfumes, cigarettes and liquor - thanks to Langkawi's duty-free status.

The island folk, students who are having their year-end break included, also found lots of opportunity to earn some extra money by taking up temporary employment in the hotels and restaurants.

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