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Mahathir-Russia

MALAYSIA WANTS TO MARKET RUSSIAN HELICOPTERS

By: Azman Ujang

ULAN UDE (Russia), Aug 22 (Bernama) -- Malaysia wants to market Russian-made MI-171 helicopters in Southeast Asia as it believes there is a big market for such utility helicopters in the region, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said here Sunday.

"There has not been proper marketing of the helicopters in Southeast Asia and we believe we could be of help in marketing them in the region," he told a news conference at the government Guest House before leaving after a three-day visit to the Buryatia Republic.

He said Malaysia itself was studying the possibility of using such helicopters but they had to be modified to suit local conditions.

Dr Mahathir yesterday toured the 60-year-old Ulan Ude Aviation Plant here which builds such helicopters, while officials of Aerospace Industries Malaysia Sdn Bhd (AIM) are continuing talks with company officials on cooperation to modify the aircraft.

Malaysia last year acquired two Russian MI-17 helicopters, a different version to the MI-171, for use in fire-fighting and rain-making.

"The military wants to use the MI-171 helicopters for search and rescue but for this, it needs considerable modification," he said.

Asked if Malaysia also plans to acquire Sukhoi fighter aircraft, the prime minister, who also visited two plants that build such aircraft here and in Komsomolsk-na-Amur, said Sukhoi fighters would be a competitor to other such aircraft if the country decided to acquire them in future.

To a question from a Russian reporter on whether Malaysia was facing any threat from any quarter and on the state of cooperation among Southeast Asian countries, he said Malaysia was not facing any threat but like all countries, would like to periodically renew such weapons system and in the process, look for the best and the most cost-effective.

"We are not afraid of anything and as far as cooperation among Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries (is concerned), we are cooperating in achieving economic recovery," he said.

Dr Mahathir described his visit to this autonomous Russian republic, as well as his earlier visit to Khabarovsk in the Russian far east last week, as "very successful" in paving the way for enhanced cooperation between Malaysian and these two regions.

But the prime minister said that before trade between Malaysia and land-locked Buryatia could increase, both sides had to overcome the difficulties in transportation of goods.

"In the first place, we don't have any direct flights between Malaysia and Buryatia and if we are to buy anything from here we have to find the most efficient way of transporting to our country. Also if we have anything to export to Buryatia, we will have to solve transport problems."

He said his visit to two Russian regions were an extension of the already good contacts between Malaysia and Russia and being a very big country, there were obviously tremendous potentials all over this vast territory.

Dr Mahathir said he decided to find out more about the republic as a part of Russia as well as to move bilateral relations to a more concrete level.

"Actually, we have already established very good contacts especially in the aviation industry and I think this is going to develop into something very real," he said.

The prime minister, who has not made an official visit to Moscow since 1987 was also asked if he plans to do so in the near future.

"We are a bit busy as we have to hold a general election before the middle of next year. You are also having your elections soon. After this I may consider making a visit," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the two parts of Russia which he just visited were unknown to the people of Malaysia and Southeast Asia and the first thing that had to be done was to publicise their potentials and beauty so that people would be interested in doing business and visiting.

He pointed out that an exchange of television programmes would be useful while Malaysians needed to know more about Russian federal and provincial laws and its policies so as to take advantage the country could offer.

Malaysia was also looking at the possibility of extracting timber and minerals from this republic and importing woolen cloth.

Following the regional economic crisis, much of Malaysian-Russian trade was done on contra-trading basis, which means that each country pays for goods with goods and only pays with hard currency for the difference.

A Russian reporter asked if Malaysia would pay in hard currency for Russian goods in future.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had largely overcome its economic problems and was back on the growth path and had reserves of foreign exchange worth US\$32 billion.

" We can pay in hard currency if necessary," he said.

The prime minister held the press conference shortly after arriving from an eight-hour sight-seeing tour of Lake Baikal, the world's deepest lake, an hour's ride from here by helicopter.

He and other members of the Malaysian delegation were taken to a jetty where they had a panoramic view of the lake which is so massive that it resembles an ocean by itself.

Water from the clear-water lake is so contamination-free that Dr Mahathir and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali drank a glass of water each taken directly from the lake.

This was followed by a two-hour boat cruise on the lake.

President Potapov later sent off Dr Mahathir, who left aboard an executive jet for Kuala Lumpur. He is due to arrive home Monday morning.

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