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PM: We can help to market Mi-171 copters in region

Hardev Kaur in Ulan Ude (Buryatia)

MALAYSIA can help in the marketing of the Russian-made Mi-171 helicopters in Southeast Asia, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said. The Prime Minister said Malaysia was also studying the possibility of using more of such helicopters.

Malaysia currently has two Ml-17s, an earlier version, which are used by the Fire and Rescue Department. Purchased from Kazan, a city near Moscow, they are used in firefighting and rainmaking.

Dr Mahathir said the military would like to use the helicopter for search and rescue operations. However, this would require the helicopters to be considerably modified.

Dr Mahathir is in Buryatia for a three-day visit. He said this at a Press conference at the end of his visit.

He believed there was a big market for the helicopter in Southeast Asia.

"But there has to be proper marketing. We think we can be of help in marketing this helicopter in the region," he said.

Meanwhile, the President of the Aerospace Industries Malaysia (AIM) Lt Jen (Rtd) Datuk Seri Mohd Yunus Mohd Tasi, said AIM was looking into setting up a service centre for the helicopters in Malaysia.

Currently, some 100 Russian-made helicopters are operating in the region. Countries that have purchased them include Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

However, there is no service centre for the helicopters outside Buryatia and the proposal from AIM could help fill this vacuum.

Yesterday, Dr Mahathir visited the Ulan Ude Aviation Plant (UUAP) which manufactures the helicopters and was given a demonstration of their capabilities. A Malaysian pilot Lt Col (Rtd) A. Munisamy piloted the Mi-171 during the aerial demonstration.

The Prime Minister had on Aug 16 visited the aviation plant in Komsomsk-na-Amure in Khabarovsk. The plant manufactures a range of aircraft including the Sukhoi fighter aircraft.

On whether Malaysia was studying any offers made by the UUAP for cooperation in the aviation industry, Dr Mahathir said AIM was looking into it.

UUAP officials briefing the Prime Minister yesterday had invited Malaysia to co-operate in a number of areas including the production of C-16 aircraft believed to be the world's first vertical takeoff and landing multipurpose aircraft.

In reply to a question from a local journalist on bilateral relations following the visit, Dr Mahathir said: "We actually have already established very good contacts especially with the aviation industry and I think that it is going to develop into something very real."

Asked whether Malaysia would in future consider buying the Sukhoi fighter, Dr Mahathir said at the moment there were no plans to do so but added: "We would include the Sukhoi as a possible competitor for other aircraft that we may want to buy."

Asked what advice he would give Malaysians who wished to do business in Buryatia, he said the first thing that needed to be done was to publicise its potential and its beauty so that people would be interested in visiting the area.

Dr Mahathir agreed that Buryatia was unknown to Malaysians and noted that perhaps an exchange of TV programmes would be useful.

Asked whether Malaysia would be able to pay for its contracts and trade with Buryatia in hard currency as "you are facing economic problems", Dr Mahathir said that Malaysia had largely overcome the problems and the country was back on the growth path.

"We have large foreign reserves which amount to US\$32 billion (RM121.6 billion) and we can pay in hard currency." However, he added that Malaysia would prefer to contra "for what we purchase from you and only pay the difference".

On business potential in Buryatia, the Prime Minister said while there was a lot of potential including mining and timber, the rules and regulations on mining, extraction, marketing and export of the minerals needed to be studied and understood first.

Asked whether he would visit Moscow anytime soon, Dr Mahathir said at the moment he was busy as the general election must be held by the middle of next year.

Similarly, Russia is holding its elections soon and it is not a suitable time for a visit.

Dr Mahathir, who had visited Khabarovsk for three days from Aug 15 to 18, noted that the two - Khabarovsk and the Republic of Buryatia - were different and each offered different opportunities including in the timber, tourism and aviation sectors.

The Prime Minister was accompanied by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Defence Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha. Dr Mahathir is the first foreign leader to visit Buryatia.

Malaysia's ambassador to Russia, Datuk Yahaya Baba said bilateral trade between Malaysia and Russia which totalled US\$300 million last year was still small and trade was in Russia's favour.

Dr Mahathir, who left for Kuala Lumpur yesterday, described his three-day visit as successful.

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