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Russian aircraft producer makes joint venture offer

Hardev Kaur in Ulan Ude

RUSSIA has invited Malaysia to co-operate and invest in the production of the C-16 aircraft, believed to be the world's first vertical take-off and landing multi-purpose aircraft.

The invitation was extended by a senior official of the Ulan Ude Aviation Plant during a briefing for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is on a three-day visit to the Buryatia Republic.

"We would like you to consider and we are ready to co-operate," the official, said, adding that "we are most comfortable working with you. We can combine our intellectual power and your industrial power" in producing the aircraft.

The aircraft can operate in various conditions and over forests and water. Designed to fly over Siberian rivers, it can be used to transport 16 passengers or cargo and for military purposes.

It can land on water, normal airports and "in very complicated conditions", operating all year round. The official told Dr Mahathir that the aircraft was very cost-effective.

In reply to a question from Dr Mahathir on how long the aircraft could remain afloat, the official replied: "As long as needed."

Currently, the aircraft is being used by the Russian military at the frontier region. In briefing Dr Mahathir on the operations and capabilities of the 60-year-old facility at UUAP, its officials said there was potential demand for about 1,000 such aircraft.

They pointed out that it was best described as a "middle-class passenger aircraft" and was "like an air taxi" and could be used to link many islands such as those of the Philippines.

When Dr Mahathir asked whether it was a certified aircraft, the official answered "no", but hastened to add that production could start soon and they needed "investment for it".

The Prime Minister was also briefed on other aircraft being manufactured at the facility, including the Su 75 and Sukhoi 39 and Sukhoi 75.

This was followed by an aerial display of the Sukhoi SU25 UB, a two-seater twin jet trainer ground attack aircraft. It was piloted by two Russian pilots while the capabilities and manoeuvrability of the Mi-171 helicopter were tested by a Malaysian pilot, Lt-Col (Rtd) A. Munisamy.

The Mi-171 is an improved version of the Mi-17 which Malaysia purchased last year. Lt-Col Munisamy said the helicopter was easy to handle and its capabilities superior to the Nuri. After serving 31 years with the RMAF, Munisamy is now project manager with Airod.

Dr Mahathir later checked the cockpit of the Sukhoi SU 25UB and jokingly said that if the instructions were not in Russian he would fly it.

Also present at the briefing and the aerial display were Foreign Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar and Defence Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha.

Meanwhile, the President of Aerospace Industries Malaysia Lt Jeneral (Rtd) Datuk Seri Mohd Yunus Mohd Tasi said AIM was encouraging UUAP to take advantage of Malaysia's strategic location, world-class facilities and incentives provided by the Government in the high technology and aerospace industry sector. This, he said in a statement, could provide a platform for the support for UUAP aerospace products.

Mohd Yunus said UUAP was keen to establish a strategic alliance with AIM in Malaysia. It recognised the many strategic advantages, comprehensive

and developed infrastructure and quality workforce that Malaysia had to offer that would provide a catalyst for UUAP to expand beyond its traditional markets.

Both parties are now exploring the possibility of establishing a regional marketing centre and an engineering/product support facility in Malaysia.

This facility will be responsible for, among others, aircraft maintenance, parts distribution and training.

The two parties are also exploring the possibility of co-operation in product improvement and modernisation to meet the demanding needs of existing operators and new customers.

In return, Malaysia has the opportunity to expand its existing aircraft modification and upgrade capability. Mohd Yunus said: "This alliance will enable the two companies to compete aggressively in the global industry."

He added that the UUAP products and related technology presented an opportunity for the Malaysian aerospace industry to enhance the country's current technological base and R&D activities.

AIM Group of Companies was initiated by the Government to spearhead the development of the aerospace industry. Airod Sdn Bhd, its main subsidiary, undertakes maintenance and overhaul for both military and commercial aircraft.

UUAP, established in 1939, is one of Russia's leading aircraft manufacturers. Among the aircraft manufactured at this facility are the Yakolev Yak-3, Mikoyan MiG-15 and MiG-27 and Kamov Ka-15/18/25.

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