

02/12/1999

Sky is the limit, LIMA shows

WHEN the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace (LIMA) show made its debut in 1991, many saw it as an expensive, over-ambitious attempt to try and kickstart the two domestic industries as well as put Malaysia on the world map for major exhibitions and tourism-related programmes. But LIMA, which is being held for the fifth time this year, has more than justified its existence.

Once upon a time, this sleepy island only had the story of a legend to tell and sell. Today it is a must-see tourist destination for foreigners and Malaysians alike. Since LIMA, the island has benefitted from a development of tourism infrastructure that others can only dream of. The airport has been upgraded to international standards, allowing wide-bodied aircraft to fly directly into Langkawi from around the world. The islanders, once a poor community, have all gained in one way or another. Landowners who became instant millionaires when the Government bought over their land to develop the infrastructure were not the only beneficiaries. Ordinary folk today run chalets and food outlets, or rent out cars and motorcycles to tourists. They also operate petrol stations and other franchises. The youths no longer have to go to the mainland to look for jobs and the people have been provided with better quality basic facilities, including health services and educational institutions.

In such a short time, LIMA has transformed Langkawi into one of the most instantly-recognised islands in the world; Bali and Phuket used to have no real competition. But more importantly, the interest created by the annual gathering of world leaders of the industries at LIMA has produced many new ideas and follow-up action programmes. Malaysia's blueprint on aerospace, for instance, is a direct result of the success of the event. The launch of Malaysia's satellites, which enabled millions in the region to view the Astro satellite television programmes and made it possible for telecommunication companies to utilise satellite technologies, has LIMA to thank too. In addition, the rapid development of domestic expertise in small aircraft manufacturing and the making of components for small and big aircraft was certainly inspired by LIMA. Malaysians also started to build seacraft and ventured into the leisure maritime business in a bigger way.

These are extremely technology-intensive endeavours and for a developing country like Malaysia to be able to participate in them is no mean feat. Although the development of these industries was a little hampered by the Asian financial crisis, Malaysia has not been affected as badly as Indonesia, once the region's major player in the aircraft manufacturing sector. The republic's aviation and aerospace industry will need more time to recover, and this has pushed Malaysia to the centre of the regional stage as a potentially key player in the post-crisis years. The country's plans, however, will not be confined to the regional market.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad made this point clear enough when opening the on-going LIMA 99 (December 1-5) yesterday with the call to the local aerospace and maritime industries to embark aggressively upon "smart partnerships" with international companies to boost their own development. This is in line with the strategy that the Government has adopted in developing other domestic industries, including telecommunications, manufacturing, and infrastructure. The attraction for the international companies is there: because aerospace and maritime

activities are catalysts for the development of new technologies and for industrial growth, they will be able, through the joint ventures, to secure stronger and longer lasting business partnerships and greater access to the burgeoning market in the region. They will also be able to take advantage of Malaysia's competitive rates, skills as well as a disciplined workforce. The local players, however, must ensure that they become active partners and, preferably, assume the leading role in the partnerships.

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