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SME Aviation to market Mi-171 copters in SEA

SME Aviation Sdn Bhd, through its alliance with the Ulan-Ude Aviation Plant of Buryatia, plans to market up to 40 Mi-171 multi-role helicopters in Southeast Asia over the next five years.

Through the alliance, SME Aviation is also expected to be involved in the development of the helicopter and providing total support for the aircraft outside Russia for the region.

The project is labelled as a smart partnership between the Malaysian Government and Russian parties towards realising Malaysia's vision of establishing a full-fledged aerospace industry.

The tie-up is also a positive result, following Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Buryatia in August.

SME Aviation chief executive officer, Lt Kol (Rtd) Mohamed Tarmizi Ahmad, said the company was enthusiastic about the venture as the Mi-171 helicopter and its other variants were widely used in the region.

"In Malaysia alone, there are six of these helicopters, two of which are being operated by the Fire and Rescue Department, while the rest are used for logging activities in Sarawak," he said.

Currently, about 100 such helicopters are operating in the region, including Sri Lanka, Vietnam, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

However, there is no service centre for the helicopters outside Buryatia.

"Due to this, we can provide the customers with after-sales services including maintenance, repair and overhaul of the helicopter, rather than sending the aircraft to Buryatia for this purpose," added Mohamed Tarmizi.

He was speaking to reporters after witnessing a flight demonstration of the Mi-8 helicopters at SME Aviation last Thursday.

The Mi-8 helicopter, which was the original version of the current Mi-171 helicopter, is manufactured by UUAP.

About 4,000 units have been sold since 1970.

Other than the Mi-8 and Mi-171 helicopters, UUAP also manufactures the SU-25UB trainer/combat aircraft.

During his visit to Buryatia, Dr Mahathir had offered to help market the Russian helicopter in the region, saying that he believed there was a big market for helicopters in the region.

SME Aviation's tie-up with the Russian company also entails modification and upgrading to customer specifications, logistics support for spares and parts maintenance, and maintenance crew training.

Mohamed Tarmizi said Malaysia's advanced infrastructure, with easy access to other countries in the world, had given the Russians confidence to team up with SME Aviation.

"This project will not only be of strategic importance to the nation but will also provide commercial attractiveness to the joint venture partners," he added.

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