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Time now for organisers to take stock of Lima's progress and needs

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LIMA '99, the fifth series of the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition, has now established itself as a regional, if not global, juggernaut, given its scope and ambition.

Conceptualised as a catalyst for the development of the nation's aerospace and maritime industries, Malaysia's premier biennial maritime and aerospace exhibition has come a long way over the past 10 years.

Critics may argue against its success but taking into consideration that Malaysia is not a traditional aerospace and maritime superpower, the Lima series has proven its mettle against all odds.

From a business point of view, Lima'99 was significant - a total of RM300 million worth of contracts was signed apart from several memoranda of understanding, mostly involving the Government and Malaysian aerospace firms.

Several contracts were signed at a special ceremony held in conjunction with the launch of the Malaysian Aerospace Industries Association, with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad witnessing.

This development, perceived as good for Lima, had been criticised in the past for having MoUs which never materialised into firm agreements.

Now with five Limas under their belts, it is pertinent that the aerospace and maritime organisers, Le Proton Lima Sdn Bhd and HW Lima Sdn Bhd respectively, should take stock of its progress.

One of the issues that could have been boosted this time was merchandising like toy planes or submarines, or replicas of the Sukhois, F-15s or MiGs.

Anyone who had been able to produce these products could have made a killing, given the clamour for such souvenirs by enthusiasts, limited only to a mad rush for flyers and pamphlets that caused confusion and mini-riots.

Other interactions were confined only to visitors taking pictures of themselves in a pilot's gear or gawking at the skies and aircraft simulators, and taking a stroll on the decks of the warships.

There were no joyrides on any of the planes or sailing on yachts, in particular Jalur Gemilang, which seemed to have been put to pasture when it could have sailed around the bay during the event in a show of pride.

What about those willing to pay for the privilege of sailing on the boat that circumnavigated the world and launched Azhar Mansor as a household name.

Perhaps, the Royal Malaysian Air Force and the Royal Malaysian Navy could set up booths to give a briefing on their activities and exploits, or where pilots or sailors from all nations taking part in the exhibition could speak about their experiences.

With the career booths lacking, where were the hobbyist booths? Or even from companies wanting to tap a growing number of schoolchildren who may be seeking a career in aerospace or maritime?

The organisers should consider a more intimate interaction with the crowd, especially those forking out the RM20 entrance fee for the aerospace segment, so as to generate better spin-offs for future Limas in terms of interest and education.

Educational prospects seemed to have been lost in all the business-to-business bluster.

But old problems persisted like lost luggage - the people who invested

time and money in the island tried to recoup their investments with questionable strategies, unnecessarily jacking up prices of products and services.

Unless the authorities check this negative trend, all efforts and investments will simply be a pall-bearer for inflation.

Exasperatingly, these complaints are becoming cliches - some may think that visitors to Langkawi have deep pockets, especially during Lima, but they have the same needs for budget accommodation and reasonably priced goods and services.

Apart from the unpredictable weather, proceedings during Lima '99 went smoothly.

It was worth noting that although 650 companies from 40 countries, including giants like Airbus Industrie, Bombardier Aerospace, Boeing and Malaysia Airlines, took part in the exhibition, the static display at the Mahsuri International Exhibition Centre was a slight disappointment.

Most of the aircraft had participated before and newer aircraft were not included.

While the display was commendable, especially the Russians who stole the show with the breathtaking manoeuvres of the Sukhoi-30, the show needed an infusion of new or experimental aircraft to make the difference.

Unfortunately, there were no-shows from the Russian Air Force, the Russian Knights, reportedly due to late confirmation. However, sources said the confirmation was delayed by the dispute over fuel supply.

Next time, Lima faces serious competition from a slew of exhibitions in the region as a curtain raiser to the new millennium.

These range from small but upcoming shows - the Thai 2000 Maritime and Aerospace, the Philippines Airport 2000 and the region's granddaddy, the Asian Aerospace 2000 in Singapore.

On the homefront, Defence Services Asia, Heli Services and Air Transport 2000 have been slated for the 2000 calendar. Besides this, other events are being organised in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and the Farnborough 2000.

Coincidentally, HW Lima, which organised the maritime component of Lima, is organising the Air Transport 2000.

Observers were perplexed on the need to have two airshows in Malaysia even though they are held in different years.

One public relations officer from an aerospace firm suggested that the new exhibition will compete directly with Lima, wondering whether the Malaysian Government expects every manufacturer to take part in both events.

"The market here is too small to have two airshows, even if one is aimed at civilians," he said. "All airshows need both defence and civil sectors, one cannot survive without the other unless this place is Oshkosh."

The PRO expects a decision soon, otherwise, there will be two competing airshows in the country.

To put everything in perspective, the Lima series has been a big stepping stone, especially for the Malaysian aerospace industry. From almost zero, the country has a well-developed aerospace sector.

It will not be too long before a Malaysian-designed and manufactured airplane will take to the air - a great achievement, considering that the first airplane was flown almost 90 years ago and the country only gained independence 42 years ago.

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