

08/10/2001

American presence still strong

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LANGKAWI, Sun. - The United States presence at the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition 2001 is still strong despite earlier fears that they may pull out following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington DC on Sept 11.

Le Proton Lima Sdn Bhd executive director Datuk Mohd Radzi Manan said today that 10 American companies were at the exhibition.

Two USAF F-15 jets and a KC-10 tanker from the US base in Okinawa, Japan may also take part.

Radzi said the event, which is scheduled to be officially opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Tuesday, promises to be one of the best to be held. He said 400 exhibitors from 26 countries will display their wares.

A total of 96 aircraft, including those from the Royal Malaysian Air Force and the Fire And Rescue Department, will take part in both the static and aerial displays.

"The highlight of the event will be the Irkutsk Be-200 amphibious jet plane," he said.

With only two days to the official opening of the exhibition, the Royal Air Force Red Arrows aerobatic team pulled out of the event.

This means that two of the best aerobatic teams in the world, the Red Arrows and Thunderbirds from the US, will not be thrilling the crowds at Lima '01.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said the decision was conveyed to him by the UK Defence Ministry today.

"The British government understands how important Lima is to Malaysia and it is with a heavy heart that they had to withdraw the Red Arrows considering the current events (in Afghanistan)," he added.

He said this after witnessing a full-dress rehearsal of the opening ceremony, which will be launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, at the Mahsuri International Exhibition Centre today.

The Red Arrows team is now stranded in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates following the enforcement of the "no-fly zone" over Afghan and Pakistani air space.

Last week, Najib announced the withdrawal of the Thunderbirds and the Gulfstream company from the show.

However, the United Kingdom will still be sending its Royal Marine band to Lima '01. A South African Rooivalk attack helicopter has confirmed participation in the event, including performing in the daily aerial display.