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Yearender-Defence

MALAYSIA'S ARMED FORCES A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH

By: Mohd Haikal Mohd Isa

KUALA LUMPUR: The Malaysian Armed Forces is well on its way to becoming a force to be reckoned with in the region, thanks to an improved economy in 2002 which saw acquisition of state-of-the-art weaponry and equipment.

The Army can now boast of greater firepower, the Navy is getting submarines and the Air Force will get more and better aircraft.

With more funds to spend the government has revived its long term military rejuvenation plan, according to defence analysts.

Malaysia's move to acquire the weaponry, however, raised questions among the legion of foreign analysts who were quick to accuse the country of provoking an arms race in the region.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak dismissed the notion as baseless and said that the purchases were planned long before the crippling economic downturn in 1997.

"The (arms) purchases are to upgrade and replace the armed forces' obsolete equipment," he said recently.

He was also quick to deny that Malaysia's military spending resulted from a similar move by Singapore.

A local defence analyst who declined to be identified said: "Whenever Malaysia spends money on defence, it will always be seen as an arms race but when Singapore does the same thing, everybody remains quiet."

Chief of Defence Forces Jen Tan Sri Zahidi Zainuddin said if competition with neighbouring countries is the basis of weapons purchase, then it will create a situation similar to an arms race.

FOUR SUBMARINES TO JOIN RMN FLEET

The most significant purchase was in June when the government signed agreements to purchase two new French-built Scorpene and two refurbished Spanish Agosta-70 submarines to serve as training platforms.

The RM3.4 billion deal with DCNI of France and Spanish shipbuilder Izar for the medium-size submarines ended the Royal Malaysian Navy's (RMN) decade-long quest for an underwater capability.

The long overdue purchase made the RMN the third in Southeast Asia to have a submarine fleet after the Republic of Singapore Navy and the Indonesian Navy.

Malaysia's submarines would be the most modern in the region as Singapore's four Swedish-made Sjoormen class submarines are older as are the German-made submarines used by the Indonesians.

The 70-metre-long Scorpene, modelled after the highly successful French nuclear-powered submarine, can carry an array of potent and effective weaponry including torpedoes as well as anti-ship missiles.

By the end of the year, 160-180 RMN personnel would be sent to France for training before the nation receives its first submarines beginning in 2007.

BULK OF SPENDING GOES TO IMPROVING ARMY FIREPOWER

The most expensive purchase was for the RMN but the procurement pattern for the whole year saw the Army getting the bulk of this year's defence expenditure.

As "the decider of any war", the Army was somewhat left out during the previous modernisation programmes in mid 1990's with the focus on upgrading the capabilities of the RMN and Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF).

The modernisation plan for the army got underway late last year when the Defence Ministry acquired 22 G5 155mm medium-range howitzers from South African arms maker, Denel.

The South African howitzers would certainly upgrade the army's artillery firepower which until now relied heavily on 12 FH-70 155mm howitzers and the more than 200 105mm Pack Howitzers.

Eyebrows were raised in the region later in the year when Malaysia decided to purchase the highly-strategic ASTROS Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) from Brazil for more than RM700 million.

The highly-accurate MLRS which saw action in the Gulf War can deliver various calibre rockets up to 90km.

An editor with Jane's Defence Weekly, Christopher F. Foss, told Bernama during Defence Services Asia '02 (DSA '02) that the purchases gave the Malaysian armed forces improved capability.

ARMY FIREPOWER TO BE CONSIDERABLY INCREASED

"That (procurement of G5 and ASTROS) has considerably increased the range and firepower of Malaysian armed forces," he said.

The army's firepower is set to increase in the months ahead as the Defence Ministry is expected to give the go ahead for the purchase for an unspecified number of French-made CAESAR truck-mounted 52-calibre 155mm howitzers.

During DSA '02 in April, several more deals were concluded for the purchase of RM1 billion-worth of Jernas short-range air defence system from MBDA (UK) Ltd, shoulder-launched Igla V-Shorads from Russia and mobile bridge from French and British companies.

Jernas, which are immune to all known electronic countermeasures as claimed by its manufacturer, has an engagement range of up to 9km and the capability to bring down cruise missiles and smart ammunition.

The Malaysian Armed Forces had until now used a combination of Starburst shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles and the recently-acquired Anza Mk2 from Pakistan as well as numerous air defence guns as its primary air defence system.

"In modern warfare, air defence capabilities are very important as they provide an umbrella of protection to infantry troops and other land assets from the assault of enemy aircraft and helicopters," said Najib.

POLISH-MADE MAIN BATTLE TANKS TO BEEF UP ARMY

March this year saw another milestone for the Malaysian army as years of evaluation on which Main Battle Tank (MBT) to choose, came to an end when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad announced that the country would buy the Polish PT-91 "Twardy".

The announcement was made during Dr Mahathir's visit to the former Warsaw Pact member country.

The tanks, manufactured by Bumar Labedy, is an upgraded version of the Russian T-70 and equipped with third-generation electro-optical and fire control systems from France for a high-probability first strike hit.

Najib said Malaysia and Poland are still negotiating the number of MBTs to acquire but he indicated that the country would probably settle for 48 PT-91s excluding support vehicles in a deal worth US\$300 million.

AIR FORCE TO GET NEW MULTI-ROLE COMBAT AIRCRAFT

With the economy projected to grow next year, thus providing a favourable climate for defence modernisation, a decision on the type of Multi Role Combat Aircraft (MRCA) to acquire is expected.

While the American FA-18/F Super Hornets are expected to make the RMAF's final cut, the Russian Sukhoi SU-30MK is a close contender.

In September, a foreign wire report said the Pentagon had notified the US Congress that Boeing, the maker of Super Hornet, might sell 18 of the fighter jets to Malaysia in a deal valued at U\$1.5 billion (RM5.7 billion).

Declining to confirm, Najib said the government has not issued any letter of intent for the Super Hornets.

In 1993 Malaysia acquired both the Russian MiG-29N and US FA-18D Hornet for the RMAF and there is no reason why it would not choose a similar path this time around. -- BERNAMA

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